December 2003

# Deep Magic

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*"Bitter Chivalry"*

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# Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
Writing Challenge 4
Fantasy Short: *Barely There* 10
Featured Artist: Todd Lockwood 11
Fantasy Short: *All Joking Aside* 15
Article: From One Geek to Another 16
Article: Safe Places For Minds to Wander 18
Interview: Emily Snyder 22
Fantasy Short: *Tiger Hearts* 26
Deep Magic Looks at Books 27
The Geek's Guide to Grammar 31
Artist Profile: Jesus Garcia 32
Fantasy Short: *Sleepwalkers* 33

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# December 2003

It is the time of year when many people abandon their goals completely and ride out the beginning of winter with food, friends, and family. This is typically followed by a little contrition and goal setting come January 1. Whatever holiday you celebrate, enjoy the month of December. And don't forget to start planning some goals to break for 2004.

Welcome to the December issue of Deep Magic. We have a special announcement this month, for it marks the commencement of a new publication. We are pleased to announce the publication of our first anthology, *Deeper Magic: The First Collection,* available now. This meaty anthology packs the literary punch of some of the best stories from our first year of publication. Here is the link to it at Amazon.com.

This month's issue brings you a rich feast of fantasy stories. From the whimsical "Barely There" by Steven Richards to a story about the long-lasting rivalry of two wizards who keep raising the bar of their practical jokes against each other in "All Joking Aside." We also welcome back A.M. Stickel who graces our pages again with "Tiger Hearts." And finally, author Jeff Wheeler brings us a little story about "Sleepwalkers."

Our cover artist this month is the renowned *Wizards of the Coast* artist Todd Lockwood. We thought his piece "Bitter Chivalry" was a perfect match for our December issue. Did you notice anything half-hidden in the snow? We also feature Mexican artist Jesus Garcia for an interior piece. His work on dragons is truly amazing. We are pleased he found us.

If you thought your holiday shopping was done already, you missed someone – our very own lovable, quotable, resident Geek, who brings you more grammar advice, as well as his wish list. But has he been naughty or nice this year?

In this issue, we also introduce you to a fellow publisher, another company devoted to the genre that shares our ideals of promoting "safe places for minds to wander." There can never be too many of those. We will introduce you to Arx Publishing and our interview with them and one of their authors, Emily Snyder.

For those expecting a new serialized novel this month, we hope you are not too disappointed. We wrapped up two novels last month and do not have one for December. But rest assured that we will be offering another one. Coming soon, a new fantasy novel in 2004.

All the best,
The Editors

*p.s. We'd like to congratulate Trey Nix, author of* All Joking Aside. *He is the proud father of a new baby girl. We wish him and his family all the best.*

## Safe Places for Minds to Wander

# Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

## December 2003 Writing Challenge

If a picture is worth a thousand words, this month's cover by Todd Lockwood must be worth twice that. Todd is an expert at filling his paintings with emotion, and this cover image, *Bitter Chivalry,* is an excellent example.

Sometimes a picture can inspire an author creatively. We think this painting should be no exception. So this month's challenge is to write a scene or short story about this month's cover image. You can start with this scene, end with it, or let it be a passing moment in your story. Regardless, try to bring out the emotion of the piece.

And, to prove the old saying, keep it to 1000 words or less.

## Selections from the November 2003 Writing Challenge

**His Hermitage**
**Inventory of a Life**
**Seeking Steven**
**Sid Visiting Nell's ... Apartment**
**The Inhabitant**

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

*Sometimes the little details of a person's life can give something away about that person even if they are not there. Learning to tap into those little life details can help flesh out a character – even when that character isn't on the stage. The writing challenge for this month is to create a setting for an absent character. The setting is visited by a narrator (which can be an actual person or an omniscient point of view). There should be clues left in the details that will reveal something about the missing character. The object is to develop a character through observation of the setting. The place can be any kind of locale - a castle, a specific room within a castle, outdoors, a cell, even a bed. The description must have enough specific details so the reader can imagine the "absent character" even though they're not present. Avoid stereotypes. Remember, the goal is to create a setting that tells us about a character even though they aren't there.*

# His Hermitage
## By Maria Ott Tatham

Lady Christofili came to the Hermit for help. She had ridden bareback, her hair streaming, punching the horse's flanks with her naked feet. She jumped down and raced to the hut. At her touch, the door creaked in and stopped. She pushed aside a vine drooping from the crooked lintel.

Inside was a homely sanctuary with a narrow cot in one corner. On a shelf, under a burning lamp strung on iron chain, were icons draped with linen, giving glimpses of gold. On the rugged table stood a squat candle anchored in drips, one wooden bowl with a wooden spoon in the remnants of greasy stew. Ink pots and quills littered the table beside a curious notebook. Her finger traveled profiles of hump-beaked birds, mouths open, glossed by phonetic notes on the language of ravens. He was learning to listen, perhaps speak to them. On the chair lay dirty socks seeming still conformed to the shape of his long feet. Rare books and moldering tomes were standing on the floor along the walls, and resting in the yellowing pile of a ram's fleece over the cot. On a moss-stained stone, was an ornate enamel stove carried through the forest from another land.

She pushed the door until it would go no further, and peered into the corners. A prie-dieu bearing marks of wear on the kneeler, his green, tasseled beads on a shelf under a covered icon. More books leaning in stacks. The dull gleam of a chamberpot under an empty sack.

She left, biting her lip, stumbling over a pan and spoon left at hand to frighten the bear from the garden. Slumping to the stoop, she cried. Her tears fell to the dust beside drops of blood. Her gaze lifted along their frightening path, down a weedy bean row toward a tree. She followed to an ancient orchard, where apple trees with girths as fat as wine casques showed amputation and grafted limbs. The horse was there, bending his head to fallen fruit. The drops ended, and bloody footprints strode on toward the forest. Was the Hermit bleeding . . . or the bear?

# Inventory of a Life
## By L. D. Huffman

Commander Brooks Day, the executive officer of the Star Cruiser Arcadia, hurried down the passageway toward the area of the crew's quarters. Closely following him were Dr. Sharon Kovach, Arcadia's medical officer and 4 crewmembers carrying two large trunks. Both officers quietly contemplated the task ahead. They were not eager to undertake this duty but the ship's commanding officer had delegated it to them. Salem Jaros, a member of Dr. Kovach's medical unit, died three days ago as part of a survey team sent to the surface of the moon they were orbiting. The event had been a tragic accident, an unintended, fatal misstep caused him to fall and puncture his oxygen tank. He suffocated before the other team members could help him. Standard operating procedure requires a member of the medical unit to accompany all survey teams

in case of such an incident. How ironic that it happened to the one team member assigned to assist in such an emergency. The price was a great one to pay for a moon that yielded so few useful resources. The grim task of inventorying Jaros' personal effects and inspecting his quarters now belonged to the executive officer and ship's medical officer.

Members of the crew have their own assigned space with its lavishness determined by rank. Jaros' unit was in the middle range of size and comfort. The ship's computer controls all functions and security for each berthing unit. "Here it is, S-17, medic Jaros' quarters," said Day. Moving closer to the control panel beside the door, he punched in the security override code. Only he and the commanding officer have access to a code circumventing whatever password each crewmember uses to lock their quarters. The door opened and the lights immediately flickered on as they entered the space. "Set the trunks over there," Dr. Kovach ordered the detail. They placed the trunks where directed. "That will be all for now, we'll call you when we are finished," Day told them. "Aye sir," the group leader replied as they turned and left. Looking at Jaro's quarters, Day was impressed with how neat and orderly everything seemed. "A place for everything and everything in its place, to coin a phrase," he said. "So it appears," replied Dr. Kovach. "How well did you know Jaros?" Day inquired. "Fairly well, as his division officer I spoke to him almost every day. I had to approve the yearly performance evaluations his crew chief wrote on him. He was a hard worker and put in long hours. I believe he would have made a good crew chief; he just did not want the responsibility. Salem also hated to delegate and was the type who felt if you want something done right you have to do it yourself. How sad that he died the way he did, he deserved better." Day nodded his agreement and said, "Yes it is. The fleet has lost too many good people over the years."

"Well, now to the task at hand, where do we begin?" asked Dr. Kovach. Day scratched his head and looked around. "How about starting in the bunking area, then the lavatory, the living area and finishing at his desk workspace?" He asked. "Sounds good, let's get started," Dr. Kovach replied. The bunking area was as neat as the rest of the quarters. The bed was made and the closet tidy. On the nightstand lay a book entitled, Advanced Chess Moves and Strategy. Next to the book was a picture of a smiling Jaros with his parents. Day was glad he did not have to inform them of their son's death; the captain would deal with that difficult process. After completing the inventory in the bunk area, the two officers moved to the lavatory. Again, everything was clean and orderly. Day opened the medicine cabinet and was surprised to see many different pills, prescription and non-prescription, all arranged systematically. "Doc, take a look at this," he said, as he motioned for her to come over. Dr. Kovach looked in the cabinet and then laughed, "Oh yes, Jaros was something of a hypochondriac." "How did he get so many pills and prescriptions?" Day asked in amazement. "When you work in medicine you can always convince someone. I did order the staff not to give him anything else unless I authorized it first, but by then he had already amassed quite a collection, as you can see." Day shook his head and closed the cabinet. After cataloging the lavatory, they moved to the living area. As with the other areas of the quarters, it was well arranged and neat. Pictures of the sea and sailing ships adorned the walls. The computer controlled personal entertainment center, indicated a preference for Jazz in music, comedies in movies and strategy in games. On the table in front of the sofa were some medical journals, a naval history magazine and more pictures of Jaros' family and friends. When the inventory of the living area was complete, Day sat down on the sofa, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes. "This is very time consuming," he sighed. "Come on Commander, only one more room to go, we are almost finished," Dr. Kovach replied. "Thank goodness," Day said stretching as he stood up. As with the rest of his quarters, Jaros' desk

and work area were immaculate. On his desk were pictures of his parents and siblings. The wall behind the desk displayed additional framed pictures of relatives, training certificates, a Meritorious Service Award, Good Conduct Award, and a Commendation for Valor. The bookshelf against the wall on the other side of the desk contained a variety of books. Volumes included medical reference works, procedures and protocols for ships in the fleet, a survey team procedure manual, a fleet military customs book, fleet rules of conduct and justice, Koshi's eight volume history of space travel and exploration, several volumes on earth military and naval history, and surprisingly, two books of poetry by Aielo of Sarta.

The two tired officers promptly finished the final part of their task. "That's it, everything is tagged and listed," Dr. Kovach declared. "We can call the detail to place everything into the trunks for transport." The packing crew took a few hours, but finally Jaros' personal belongings were ready to ship to his family. The berthing space looked empty and lifeless, Just as Jaros' body had when Dr. Kovach examined him after the accident. Life is fragile, thought Commander Day. How much can be learned about a person just from the things they collect and the items they possess, their likes and dislikes and what is important or unimportant to them. As they were leaving, Day turned and looked one last time at the quarters. His mind's eye could envision Jaros playing chess against the computer, reading a book on naval history, listening to Jazz or popping a pill for another imagined illness. "It's crazy Doc, but I know more about Salem Jaros now than I did when he was alive," Day said. "I guess every living space here has a story to tell," the doctor answered. Day smiled and nodded as they walked back down the passageway. The space was vacant awaiting the next occupant to fill it with a new inventory.

# Seeking Steven

## By A.M. Stickel

Milady!" Wee Kirk, Chief Pixie Detective, his toes a-curl in anticipation, hitched up his brown hose and rose from his knees to his full six-inches, a magnifying glass before his nose in a dramatic pose. Flanked by his quiet green-and-gold garbed officers, Eeny, Meany, Miney and Moe, he meant to favorably impress the Beauteous and Immortal Faerie Queen. Their autumn colors set off Titania's basic black. She liked that, and their silence. At Titania's growled reply, her minions trembled. She liked that too.

Wee continued, "Were it not for the invisible mice, and your aid, Highness, we'd never have discovered their protector's trail. Their spoor gave away their nest. We'll test the clues in the nest to find out the rest. The mice must have been the final straw that broke the back of Steven's sorcerous ambitions. Oh, he succeeded in making his little friends invisible all right. But he hadn't considered their smelly, highly visible trail of droppings. This revelation broke Steven. Bowed by the weight of the worst of his fears, neither could he face the jeers of his peers. Nothing is worse than failure to help a friend. And mice were his only friends. In his disillusion, he apparently came to the conclusion that he needed a special kind of seclusion."

Titania, peering into the mouse hole, voiced a howl of dismay. Then, after a thoughtful pause, she smiled a terrible smile. Her gleaming teeth and eyes revealed her intentions once she caught up with Steven, or, if she did not, what fate awaited Wee and crew. Even eight-inch tall

Meany shrank back.

Steven's squalid hut was littered with his leavings – half eaten tarts, their edges nibbled by his rodent companions; mismatched, gnawed upon shoes; two ragged tunics, patched in clashing colors; alchemical spirits left burbling too long, all a-drip; scraps of strewn parchment. A sour miasma overlay all.

In the vacant mouse lair, however, all was tidy, as if the occupants had just finished a meal of crumbs and dew, and had pushed their mushroom chairs away from their toadstool table. Acorn and thimble "mouseware" was stacked in one corner. A tiny straw broom stood in another corner. Household droppings had been swept up and deposited in a lidded teacup-turned-mulch pail outside the hole. Bright kerchiefs made cozy coverlets for three matchbox beds with mattresses of milkweed fluff. A meadow scene tapestry, woven by deft paws from bits of thread, hung upon a twig loom in a third corner. The elegant habitat's contrast to Steven's clued Wee as to his whereabouts.

Wee buffed his P.D. badge on his tunic. "Milady, we'll bring the miscreant who duped you to justice, round up those mice and enlist a *true* sorcerer to change them into Faerie Steeds, as Steven so miserably failed to do. You'll be restored, and given the fine winter fur coat you desired, instead of that with which Steven provided you in error. "

The Queen hissed in approval, paused to lick her silky shoulder, and nipped at a flea at the base of her tail in a most unladylike manner.

"Steven, who admires them, wanted to be like the mice," observed the astute Wee, continuing, "So, he has shrunk himself, become invisible and joined them. The evidence is in the mouse mulch pail, where he tried to hide his own droppings among theirs, just before they all scampered off. Now, if Your Majesty will be so kind as to let us board her once again, and to sniff out his trail…"

# Sid Visiting Nell's Absent Apartment

## By Steve Poling

Nell's landlady let me in. I said it was a building collapse, but didn't say which building. Nell's parents were flying in for the memorial service Monday and I wanted to make sure they didn't find anything from the project. Her dad's a historian and I didn't want him stumbling over some 1st century amphora.

The place was a mess. I picked up a back issue of Archaeological Review lying next to the futon and put it on the desk. The framed picture of Alexandro dancing the Tango with her bent way back, her long blonde hair spilling back touching the floor. That guy was trouble. Nell had fallen hard. She didn't say a word when she got off the suborbital from Rio. Word had it she put him in the hospital with some fancy capoera kick to the face. He didn't press charges—a matter of honor. Chivalry from a gigilo. Who could understand a guy snatched from the 20th century. Sid put the picture in his coat pocket.

The bookshelf held several bits of antiquity. Sid studied each in turn. They all looked old enough, even the Norden bomb-sight from Carl Galt's P-38. General Interplanetary was bringing Carl down from Copernicus shipyards this afternoon. So many lives saved. She'd even helped

that smug time-traveller from the future.

The bedroom surprised Sid. He expected stark Scandinavian retro-minimalist furnishings like the rest of the apartment. Instead, everything was all pink frills and rococo. He blushed at the thought that behind a smart-alek personnae hid a romantic little girl who put lace doilies on her nightstand. Sid retreated, closing the door almost reverently.

There wasn't anything in the kitchen. The fridge held half a six-pack of beer and vitamins. A few energy bars held down a shelf in the pantry. Such a pity to miss the pleasure of food prepared with attention to every last detail. She'd eaten hard tack with the slaves in Alexandria and been too busy when Nestor put together an elaborate dinner for them last year.

Why hadn't she listened? Why'd she have to go down that stairwell? She knew to the millisecond when the North tower collapsed. Always cutting things a little too close, taking one more risk, the odds caught up with her. He started to the door. The apartment was safe. On his way out the door, Sid took the Archaeological Review with the picture of the World Trade Towers on its cover.

# The Inhabitant

## By Ray Ibrahim

It really was quite typical of the beast; one look at his lair and there was no question as to the monstrosity of the inhabitant. Deep in the bowels of the earth it was, dark and damp, with the foul stench of decay pervading the whole of the cavern. Strew about were crushed and decaying bones of his latest victims— they who had made the foolhardy attempt of robbing the guardian.

The most telling sign of the inhabitant's pedigree, in fact, was the shiny mountain of gold situated directly in the center of the cave, where he often rolled in bliss and always slept atop in everlasting vigilance. Many a year had this ancient one been at labor hoarding this vast treasure; much wickedness and foul deeds were committed in its gathering.

Lest you still be unsure, or have a doubt about the nature of the inhabitant, the guardian of the hoard, witness his dawn arrival, after the completion of another night of greed-filled malice: fire fills the entrance of the cave, announcing the arrival of the inhabitant. But lo! only an old man enters, with a torch to light the dark way before his dimming eyes. Yet if the form of the inhabitant dismays you, if you were expecting a much larger, serpentine, fire-breather, recall this: it is the heart, not the form — the soul and not the body — that make for men and monsters.

And after all, was this hoarder's evil not darker than the darkest dragon's gold-lust? For he, as a man, could have used the gold — both for his sake and others of his kind; while a dragon can make no use of gold other than mere possession.

The old, tattered man bends atop his heap and pours out the contents of his bag: gold, the unused wages of a life wasted in hoarding.

# Barely There

## By Steven Richards

A lemon lay discarded on the cold, wooden tabletop. It was small, rounded, and almost blindingly yellow. The lemon, that is. The table, on the other hand, was roughly rectangular in shape, built with sturdy maple boards. It was held together by two rows of flimsy wooden pegs. There was presumably some sort of underlying structure beneath the tabletop to keep the entire thing from collapsing in a splintery heap.

Atop it lay the lemon. And across from the lemon sat a young girl, perhaps eleven years old. Her green eyes focused intently on the lemon, unwavering and unblinking. It was meant to be an intimidating stare; the sort of stare that would make most people quiver in their boots.

This was, in fact, what she was trying to accomplish, aside from the boots. It didn't seem to be working, however; the lemon remained obstinately motionless, and the girl's eyes were beginning to water. At last, with a long sigh, she broke contact and rubbed the tears from her eyes. It was no use.

"You can't stay like that forever," she said, and flicked the lemon viciously with one finger. It rolled a few inches before coming to a stop. "I *saw* you move."

And so it seemed. The lemon *had* moved. Not more than an inch, but in such a surreptitious manner that Mina could not help but notice. Inanimate objects shifted position from time to time, forced by gravity into a gradual slide that ultimately ended with an apple rolling onto the floor.

**"You can't stay like that forever," she said, and flicked the lemon viciously with one finger. It rolled a few inches before coming to a stop. "I saw you move."**

But they never sneaked. She was sure of that. This one had.

"Maybe you're a prince in disguise," she mused. "Or a prince under a curse, more likely. Come on, out with it. I'm right, aren't I? You offended some witch…yes, that's it. She was so horribly ugly that you made a sour face, so she cursed you to be a lemon!"

"What are you doing, dear?" Mina's mother posed the question from the doorway of the kitchen, coming back from the henhouse with the morning's supply of eggs.

"Interrogating this lemon, mum."

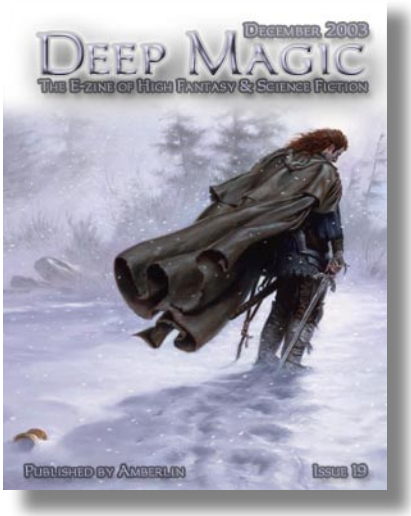
"Hmm," said her mother. "I need the table to prepare lunch. Why don't you go do that outside?"

Mina scooped up the lemon and went outside. The day was already bright, and she sneezed once before adjusting to the sunlight. Pa was wandering through the yard, sprinkling slug-repellant. The big, ugly purple brutes with razor-sharp teeth were after the roses, and we can't have *that* now, can we, Henry dear? Mina watched him for a moment, and then headed across the dusty ground to the barn. If Pa saw her, he'd draft her to take over the slug-repelling. Bleh.

As she passed through the double doors, the lemon settled smugly into her palm. Unable to contain herself any longer she let out a half-scream and shouted at the lemon. "Now see here!

continued on page 34

# Featured Artist
## Todd Lockwood




**Age:** 46
**Residence:** Bonney Lake, Washington
**Marital Status:** Married
**Children:** Aubrey 20, Tyler 16, Caitlin 13
**Hobbies:** Landscaping, Hiking, Political Activism :o)
**Personal Quote:** "True religion is the life we lead, not the creed we profess." Louis Nizer
**Favorite Book or Author:** Tolkien (and his amazing "Lord of the Rings"), Larry Niven (who wrote my favorite sci-fi novel of all time, "The Mote in God's Eye"), Lovecraft ("The Dunwich Horror"), Joseph Campbell (his "Transformation of Myths Through Time"), Robert Silverberg (whose short story "Night Wings" is a favorite)...last but not least, my all-time favorite book "To Kill a Mockingbird," by Harper Lee.

**Professional and Educational Information:**
Colorado Institute of Art, 1979-1981; DeOlivera Creative, Inc., a design shop in Denver: head designer '81-'83; Freelance illustrator, with agents in Denver and New York: '83-'96; TSR/Wizards of the Coast; Staff Illustrator: Lead Concept artist for Third Edition Dungeons and Dragons: '96-'02; Freelancing again! '03 —
**Started Painting In:** 1974
**Artist Most Inspired By:** Michael Whelan, Frank Frazetta, NC Wyeth
**Media You Work In:** Pencil, Acrylics, Oils, Digital: Painter and Photoshop
**Educational/Training Background:** Colorado Institute of Art, 1979-1981
**Other Training:** On the job training, baby!
**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:**
http://www.toddlockwood.com/
todd@toddlockwood.com

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**
A: I have been drawing since before I can remember. Literally, I am told, from the time I could hold a pencil in my hand.

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I was born and grew up in Boulder Colorado. I had the Rocky Mountains in my backyard, and I got to see the "summer of love" through the eyes of an eleven year old in a college town. I watched Lost in Space in the third grade, when G.I. Joe was new, and Star Trek after that. Needless to say, Science Fiction consumed my childhood. Later, in my teens, I discovered Tolkein's Lord of the Rings, and Fantasy like the Conan stories of Robert Howard and the horror of HP Lovecraft. As an adult I became fascinated with Mythology, particularly transformative mythology and the hidden meanings of Myth, and the ways that the world's religions have influenced each other and changed our understanding of our relationship with God again and again. Joseph Campbell is a hero of mine for his thoughtful and thorough exploration of the World's Myths.

My first artistic influence, like so many in my field, was probably Walt Disney. What can I say? Then I discovered Frank Frazetta. Later came Michael Whelan, though I had some ad-world influences, too, particularly after I started art school. David Wilcox. Peter Lloyd. Also Boris, Jeff Jones. But I really wanted to be Michael Whelan. I studied at the Colorado Institute of Art, primarily a design school. The quarter after I graduated, they started conferring Associates Degrees for the course I had finished, so I claim to have an associates degree, though I technically don't. I got a good job in a hot design shop in Denver right out of school, won a bunch of awards- even a silver medal in the Art Directors Club of New York annual show- but after a year and a half, I had had enough. I left to pursue

continued on next page

illustration. I spent fifteen years doing ad work. Coors was one of my biggest clients; I have painted a lot of beer cans. I could do dew drops in my sleep. At one point I had some covers that I had done for Satellite Orbit magazine in the CA Annual; for years after that I was the "satellite dish guy". I came to really hate satellite dishes. If I had ever had a painting with both a beer can and a satellite dish in it, my ad career would have been complete.

Throughout those years, I was an avid Dungeons and Dragons player. My friends and I were still active gamers when I left Colorado to work with TSR, though we were playing a game called Earthdawn by then. I flipped when TSR started having really good art on their products. Jeff Easley's stuff particularly interested me: so moody and fluid, so deft. Then Brom came along and really blew my doors off. I started to get more and more frustrated with the work I was doing, stuck in the wrong market. I had agents in New York—very high-profile, reputable agents—who were simply not interested in marketing me to the book companies. Or in doing their job. I was doing work I hated, for people without a clue.

Then Terry Czezcko at *Asimov's* gave me a couple of magazine covers. That was the beginning. I felt revived; I was painting things that interested me! I told her that I wanted more of that kind of work, and she suggested that I hang a show at one of the sci-fi/fantasy conventions, preferably WorldCon. I said, "hang a show at a what?" I had never heard of sci-fi conventions. I was that naive. I had heard of GenCon, the premier gaming convention, but it was in Milwaukee, and I wasn't so rabid a D&Der that I wanted to got that far for a game. I had no idea. But I took my *Asimov* covers and some personal work to the WorldCon in Winnipeg.

It was a revelation! I met other artists, and saw so much amazing work. I wanted to hide my own paintings... or burn them. But I met Michael Whelan, who responded very favorably to the black and white work I had done, particularly "Cerberus". I went home inspired, and determined to do more and better work. From Winnipeg I got some interior work for Carl Gnam, at *Realms of Fantasy* and *Science Fiction Age* magazines. With those two magazines and my *Asimov* and *Analog* covers, I was starting to build a portfolio of published work in the field I had always wanted to be

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a part of. I fired my agents in New York.

My first work in the gaming industry was some cards for Chaosium, and for Phil Foglio's naughty deck. Then a friend I made at a convention—a very good friend and a talented, wonderful guy, David Martin, who has been around the convention/gaming/sci-fi/fantasy block more than a few times—suggested me to an art director at TSR. I had sent TSR portfolios in the past, but they didn't want to look at ad work, and weren't going to give covers to someone who couldn't show them what they wanted to see. But now I had the beginnings of a real portfolio. The art director, Stephen Daniele, gave me a bunch of character portraits for one of the Spellfire decks. Then some book covers for TSR. Then, when Fred Fields and Robh Ruppel both quit within a month of each other, a magical door opened. It was very much a matter of being the right person in the right place at the right time. I knew the games, had done some work for them that they were happy with, and they needed someone quickly. TSR had burned some bridges with some of their other prospects, but that worked for me. I was happy to jump.

These days I enjoy the art of Brom and Michael Whelan still, also Donato Giancola, Mark Zug, Zdzislaw Beksinski, Keith Parkinson, the Hildebrandts....

**Q: What do you consider your influences?**
A: Artists: Michael Whelan, Frank Frazetta, NC Wyeth, Spike Jones, my dad, Brom, Walt Disney. I grew up on Star Trek and all the cheesier TV sci-fi shows like the Time Tunnel, Land of the Giants, Lost in Space, and classic sci-fi movies: Forbidden Planet, The Thing, War of the Worlds. Star Wars was a revelation. I liked Jonny Quest and Space Ghost (back when he was an action hero, though I like him as a talk-show host now, too). I read a lot of Larry Niven sci-fi. The *Mote in God's Eye* is the best sci-fi novel ever. Then Tolkein entered my world when I discovered his, followed not too much later by D&D. Then I found the books of Joseph Campbell and became immersed in transformative mythology.

**Q: Tell us the story of this piece (Bitter Chivalry).**
A: One of my personal favorites, done for Carl Gnam at *Realms of Fantasy* magazine. The protagonist seeks the Grail, and has missed it entirely, of course, which is often the way of such quests. It's a common theme in Celtic mythology: the heroic, valiant, but ultimately futile and tragic effort.

**Q: Do you play D&D and other RPGs?**
A: I played RPGs, especially D&D, for 20 years before coming to TSR and Wizards of the Coast. We were playing Earthdawn, which was an awesome game, when I left Colorado to take this job. I don't get to game very often any more, which is a strange thing for me, though I am still living the game in a different way now. My old gaming groups consisted of a business manager, a lawyer, a home handyman, a computer whiz, a bookkeeper/housewife, and a lunatic artist.

**Q: Who are the up-and-comers among the artists in your genre? Who do you see going places?**
A: Matt Stawicki is awfully good. Watch out for Sam Wood; he is learning to paint. I would keep an eye on Raven Mimura, Arnie Swekel, Puddinhead, John Foster, Justin Sweet, Terese Neilson, and Wayne Reynolds, too.

# All Joking Aside

## By Trey Nix

The flowers, blooming in the early spring air, waved gently in a breeze that blew across the meadow from the western slopes of the hill. The tang of salt from the port city at its base was barely discernable amidst the many fragrances and crisp dampness of the passing morning's chill.

Everol bent his aged frame to pick a few blossoms with calloused, yet tender hands. He added them to a leather pack at his side, careful to keep them separated from the dozen other varieties he had collected. When he was satisfied with their placement he straightened slowly, brushing a fine wisp of gray hair from his face. For a moment he closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of the rising sun as it caressed his face.

A dull boom sounded behind him, breaking into his reverie. Twisting to look at the simple, white stone walls of the university, he saw a sooty cloud rising from the inner courtyard, forming a beautiful mushroom. He grimaced. The administrators of the university were going to be upset at his latest prank. Xinius, it appeared, had not waited to be in his tower before accidentally tripping the small spell Everol had hidden in the ink bottle. His friend always fell for the obvious.

**It was time to start for home; time to see the damage he had wrought. His little trip to collect flowers for his spells was at an end.**

Stepping carefully over the blooms at his feet, Everol ran through a mental inventory, making sure he had everything. It was time to start for home; time to see the damage he had wrought. His little trip to collect flowers for his spells was at an end.

At least, he sighed, Xinius had not been in the library.

* * *

Two students stood, arms out, as they looked at their robes, completely covered in a fine mist of purplish ink. One of them cursed loudly as he beheld the damaged scroll he carried. His companion silenced his outburst by pointing at the center of the catastrophe.

Xinius stood in mute frustration beneath one of the arches framing the university's courtyard, his white robes having disappeared under the inky assault and a large drop of the dark liquid poised to fall from his chiseled nose. The forgotten inkwell dropped from his hands, bouncing once before it rolled in a large arc toward the foot of one of the cringing students.

Despite the fact that the inkwell was empty one student lifted a sandaled foot to avoid it.

Xinius reacted to the movement with anger. A book from the library, a prized possession in any learned collection, flew from his hands toward the student's head. It missed, crashing against the far wall in a splay of loose papers.

Spurred into action, the students darted away from the enraged sorcerer before he decided to vent his anger through other means. They disappeared down a side hall. Xinius watched them go, forcing himself to breath slowly and deeply, attempting to reach an inner calm.

continued on page 37

# From One Geek to Another

## By Jeremy Whitted

A funny thing happened to me at the bookstore a few weeks ago. I went to Borders to pick up a couple magazines. First, let me mention that I don't often go to bookstores, especially to buy magazines. But I'm too lazy to subscribe to some of them. I also don't go to Borders much, not that there's anything wrong with them.

Anyway, I found my two magazines and went to the counter to pay for them. The clerk took one look at my magazines and said (and I kid you not), "Ah, a fellow geek." What, did he read my last article? How did he know it was me? I mean really, does he just go around calling people "geeks" willy-nilly? Well, needless to say I was flattered, but still….

And to answer the inevitable question, I was purchasing *Mac Design* (for you fellow Mac geeks—I already subscribe to *MacAddict* and *MacWorld*) and *Dragon* (a D&D geek mag that I don't subscribe to and actually don't purchase often—this issue just had something that interested me). So there you have it. Called a geek by a total stranger.

Of course, just a few days later, I was inadvertently called a geek by a co-worker. Everyone at work knows I love my Mac, and this guy loves ribbing me about it (ah, the call of the ignora…uninformed). Anyway, he was commenting on how silly it was to have a Macintosh commercial during Monday Night Football. Why? "Because Mac geeks don't watch sports, they play Dungeons and Dragons and $@*! like that!" Man, did he nail me or what? Of course, I do like watching sports, so he wasn't quite correct. But he got me with the D&D comment, though I didn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he was right about me. Then I'd really never hear the end of it.

Now that I have fully embraced my geekdom, I take joy in the casual references that I find so dear. There's my favorite X-Files line ("I didn't play Dungeons and Dragons for all those years without learning a little something about courage."), a great one, of many, from News Radio ("I appreciate your Dungeons and Dragons approach to management, Dave"), and the many Mac-bashing "commercials" making their way around on the Internet (which, while I disagree with what they say, constantly crack me up). Then there's the GE commercial where the geek and supermodel fall in love. His gift to her? A Dungeons and Dragons player's handbook. Too funny. And true! You should see my wife. It can actually happen!

I have also recently embraced a new area of my geekdom with the recent Deep Magic feature: The Geek's Guide to Grammar. Yes, I am a grammar geek. Some may call me the Grammar Police, even; however, I am willing to let style override common grammatical sense. If the style is good, that is. But I find myself really wanting to correct people when they speak. My better sense usually keeps me from doing so, but dang it's hard! Like when someone says something is a mute point. What, it can't speak?!? It's a MOOT point people, not mute. You know, pronounced like "boot." But alas, few listen to my grammarian ramblings.

I once went through in my head and tried to come up with as many tenses as I could think of in the English language, and examples of each (you know, like present tense, past tense, conditional tense, etc.). You know how many I came up with? About 16-18. (Well, technically, they were inflections, not tenses.) Not sure I could name them all again, but it was fun. How sad is that?

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So now it's December, and I'm trying decide what to buy my wife and kids for Christmas. And, of course, I'm trying to come up with what everyone can get me for Christmas. (When I say everyone, I'm including you!) I'm hoping to get more than a lump of coal this year… Anyway, now seems as good a time as any for the Geek's Christmas Wish List.

**The Oxford English Dictionary.** This comes in a 20+ volume version or a single-volume version with a magnifying glass (the writing is really, really small). Personally, I don't care which version I have, though given the limited storage space in my house, the small version would be best. For those unfamiliar with this work, it is THE English dictionary. Not only does it define a word, it gives the word's completely history. Very cool for the English Geek. (Purchase this for The Geek.)

**The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition.** After a long, long wait, the 14th edition has finally been updated, and I really want it! This style manual is my Bible. Well, ok, the Bible is my Bible, but the CMS is pretty close! (Purchase this for The Geek.)

***MacDesign* subscription.** I've just been too lazy to subscribe to this magazine, but I love it. Each issue contains excellent tips for graphic design, page layout, etc. I already get *MacAddict* and *MacWorld* (as I mentioned already), and this magazine would compliment my collection nicely. (Purchase this for The Geek.)

**Neverwinter Nights for Macintosh.** This is a great computer game based on Dungeons and Dragons. Cool game, and it's available on the Mac now. (Purchase this for The Geek.)

**iPod.** Ah…the iPod. If you haven't held one of these in your hands yet, go to CompUSA (or whoever sells them in your area) and check it out. It's beautiful, sleek, sexy…and it currently comes with up to 40GB of storage. And you Windows users can use it, too. If you want a friend for life, this is the gift to give me. (Purchase this for The Geek.)

**Dragonslayer DVD.** It took a while, but my favorite fantasy movie (before Lord of the Rings, of course) has come to DVD. It's not too expensive, so it's a perfect give to give me for those of you on a tight budget. (Purchase this for The Geek.)

All of the above items can be found on my Amazon.com Wish List, along with many, many more items! Feel free to browse the list and buy me anything on there you'd like! (Let me know if too many of the items there get purchased by others. I'll be more than happy to add more to it.)

Christmas is a great time for Geeks. There are just so many cool gadgets, games, and goodies out there that even the greatest of Geeks can be satisfied. I realize, of course, that there may be a number of you out there that do not celebrate Christmas. But that's ok. No reason you still can't buy me a gift! From one geek to another.

Yours Truly,

Jeremy Whitted
Geek

# Safe Places For Minds to Wander

In July of 2001, the core founders of *Deep Magic* were hammering out some of the details that would become *Deep Magic: the e-zine of high fantasy and science fiction*. We debated (endlessly it seemed) for an appropriate title for the e-zine. We bashed around different ideas to work the name of our publishing company into it: *The Amberlin Journal: a Fantasy/Sci-Fi E-zine by Amberlin (too redundant), The Amberlin Chronicle of Fantasy & Science Fiction, The Amberlin Digest, The Golden Fleece (this was Brendon's dumb idea…), The Amberlin Fantasy Journal.* To no avail.

Then Brendon actually came up with a good idea: develop a new name and a tag-line. We decided on *Deep Magic*, a nod to C.S. Lewis. We wrestled over "the e-zine of high fantasy and science fiction" a little. It's "the" e-zine instead of "an" e-zine for one simple reason. We were determined, of course, that it would be *the* e-zine. The best one. For a tagline, we turned to Randy Whitted, the brother of one of our editors. We told him our ideas – our vision – for the e-zine and he summarized it succinctly as an e-zine where readers would find "safe places for minds to wander."

Since the inception of *Deep Magic*, we have looked for others on the internet who share similar themes. We love fantasy fiction and science fiction. We also promote morally responsible literature and artwork.

We would like to take this opportunity to make you aware of one we have talked to: ***Arx Publishing***.

One caveat – we are not trying to endorse any specific religion or way of life. The fields of high fantasy and science fiction have broad appeal. We'd like to keep it that way.

* * *

**Arx Publishing**

**DM:** Tell us the story of how Arx Publishing came to publish authors "whose high literary style, subject matter, and values are often at odds with prevailing popular culture" (see their submission guidelines).

**Arx (Claudio):** I started out as a writer first. After taking a fiction-writing class in college, I realized that my taste in books was dreadfully out of fashion: the Aeneid, Beowulf, the Song of Roland, the romances of Nathaniel Hawthorne. That's really the kind of stuff I most admired, but literary fiction was dominated by post-modernists, cultural relativists, and other philosophical malcontents who denied traditional values. Now I wasn't even religious at the time, but virtue, courage, honesty, truth, joy—these were ideas that I wanted to communicate in my work. This is really where the classics gave me some direction, and pointed a way out of the artistic morass of post-modernism. Throughout this time I was writing my first book the *Laviniad*, which came out of my love for the Aeneid and ancient Rome, and decided that rather than trying to submit it, I would publish it on my own. That's how the company got started, but because we were still miniscule, we didn't actively look for manuscripts for quite a while. Then, even before we were really ready to start a literary program, Nick Prata submitted "Angels in

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Iron" to us, and we thought it was one of the best books we had ever read. We published it, and since the company was reorganized under the Arx Imprint in 2001, we have been steadily adding books to the catalog that reflect the timeless values and writing style of the classics.

**DM:** Do you consider yourselves a "Christian" fantasy publisher?

**Arx (Tony):** The short answer is yes, even though it might not be blatantly obvious from looking at our web site. This was an issue for us when we first started up. Did we want to be "explicitly" Catholic? One of our major goals was to put attractive, well-written books into people's hands that celebrated traditional Christian virtues rather than ridiculing them. Most folks today—young people in particular—are fed a steady diet of immorality and Christian-bashing in books, magazines, newspapers, on TV, radio and in the movies. We decided that the audience we're trying to reach would most likely respond apathetically or even with revulsion at the thought of reading a "Christian" book. Therefore, in the interest of prying open those initially closed minds, we decided to go with a more "stealth" approach. This is best seen, perhaps, in our title "Dream of Fire" by Nicholas Prata. On the surface, it's a Conan-style, sword-and-buckler military fantasy. However, Nick was able to introduce and make central a Christian religious element, "without preaching to his readers," as one of our secular reviewers put it.

**DM:** What technology to you use to publish your titles? Traditional offset or print on demand (POD)?

**Arx (Claudio):** We're very versatile in terms of our manufacturing. Our latest fiction titles have all been produced as high-quality paperbacks in offset print runs: run-of-the-mill publishing in other words. But since our very first title, we have also been producing deluxe clothbound editions that are sewn and bound on-demand, with traditional bookbinding techniques. Actually, we do all the POD work in-house.

**DM:** What has been the general public reaction to your publishing company? What have been your biggest successes?

**Arx (Tony):** Well, that depends who you ask! Our initial forays into the public arena were at various fan cons here in the northeastern US such as I-Con, Philcon, Balticon, JerseyDevilcon, etc. These events can be the devil's playground, but they may also be viewed as fertile ground for evangelization. We try our best to appear on the "religion" panels at the cons, which are usually devoid of other Christian voices. We've received some positive feedback and some negative. We've only been called "nazis" once so far. We're just starting to tap our biggest success area right now—namely, homeschoolers. These folks are voracious readers and are desperately looking for material to give their kids to read which will stimulate the imagination without leading them down some dark path. The Catholic homeschoolers in particular have been very receptive to our books. We attended our first homeschool conference earlier this year and had our best showing yet.

**DM:** What marketing efforts have yielded your best results? Are you only available on-line, or through bookstores as well?

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**Arx (Tony):** As I mentioned above, it's the homeschoolers. There seems to be a real dearth of quality reading material that appeals to teenagers and our books seem to fit that bill pretty well. Our other successful marketing effort has been our catalog/literary magazine, *The Tarpeian Rock*. It's a 16-page freebie with a nice 4-color cover that we mail or hand out at the conventions we attend. We've tried placing some ads in various trade publications and other selected venues, but these met with less success. As for bookstores, we're available through the major wholesalers but without a sales force, it's tough to get placed. As it is, we get into stores here and there but it's generally the exception rather than the rule at this point. We've done much better with internet sales.

**DM:** At *Deep Magic*, we sometimes receive fantasy submissions with religious themes specific to a certain religion or denomination. How do you react to religious themes in the work submitted to you?

**Arx (Claudio):** It really depends on the work itself. I can't lay out a formula because you can have on the one hand Shakespeare and C.S. Lewis who are very non-denominational, and on the other Dante and Milton who are very obviously Catholic and Protestant respectively—and they are all great writers. Even pagans like Homer and Vergil have been very highly regarded by Christians for thousands of years. The link here is not only their artistry, but also their deep sense of morality and their fidelity to human nature. A writer can be firmly denominational and partisan, and also very gracious and human as well.

**DM:** Have you received support from, or made inroads with, other morally responsible publishers?

**Arx (Tony):** Yes. You may have noticed from our web site that we distribute a number of books for other small independent publishers, including the *Starman Series*. These books tell an interesting and exciting classic science-fiction story, minus the empty secularism that permeates other staples of the genre. The Star Trek series is perhaps the worst offender in this regard—viewing humanity as on an inevitable trajectory which completely eliminates religion as an archaic vestige of the past. We are also members of the Catholic Writers' Association and The Mythopoeic Society, which have enthusiastically helped us spread the word about our books. We're also going to be distributing some titles from Bethlehem Books very soon. And of course, we're always looking for new alliances.

**DM:** What distributors have picked up your offerings? What has been you experience in working with them?

**Arx (Tony):** We're in with Ingram and Baker & Taylor. Personally, I wouldn't recommend that small presses get involved with Ingram right away as they are rather merciless with the little guy—demanding very high discounts, consignee shipping, ISBN set-up fees, cooperative marketing agreements, etc. B&T is considerably better with regard to the flexibility of their terms. None of these will do too much for you in terms of marketing unless you are willing to pay for it.

**DM:** To this point, what has been the most rewarding aspect of your work in the publishing

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industry?

**Arx (Tony):** I was in the business for seven years before starting Arx, working for a small Dutch publishing company and a large British one. Both of these were secular academic presses that published several books that were openly hostile to Christian teaching or morality. The most rewarding aspect to this point is being my own boss, being able to call the shots, and not having to worry that my beliefs will be an impediment to my career and vice-versa. It will all be even more rewarding if we can have a positive impact on the culture. After all, the real point of all this is to lead people out of the pop-culture vacuum and back to Christ.

**DM:** What are your future plans? What projects are the most exciting to you right now?

**Arx (Claudio):** One great thing about our authors is their creative versatility, and in the future we hope to exploit those talents as much as possible. Emily Snyder's *Niamh and the Hermit*, our latest title, features four melodies that the author wrote herself; soon we hope to offer the full orchestration for these pieces and other songs that Emily composed for the book. We have a sci-fi farce that is currently being serialized in "Nth Degree: The Fiction and Fandom 'Zine," called *The Annals of Volusius* which we'll publish once it's finished its run. And our ever-prolific authors are always building on their own literary worlds.

**DM:** Look 5 years into the future. Where do you see Arx Publishing?

**Arx (Tony):** I see us remaining a small but dynamic company publishing 4-6 fiction books per year. I see us recognized and appreciated by many, but despised and ridiculed by others. And that's fine with us.

For more information, see their website: www.arxpub.com

# Emily Snyder
## Interview

**Age:** 25
**Residence:** Massachusetts
**Marital Status:** Single
**Hobbies:** Directing, Choreographing, Reading, Watching Movies, Drawing, Building Websites, Composing, Playing Piano, Singing....
**Personal Quote:** "Life is a banquet, and most poor folks are starving to death." — Auntie Mame "Seek out the Good, the True, and the Beautiful." — me, I suppose.
**Favorite Book or Author:** in realistic fiction, Victor Hugo "Les Miserables," in fantastic fiction, Paula Volsky "Illusion"
**First time you tried to get something published:** Sophomore year of high school, to Marion Zimmer Bradley's Sword and Sorceress Anthology. I later broke into it! :)
**Authors Most Inspired By:** Victor Hugo, Paula Volsky, Teresa Edgerton, Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, C. S. Lewis, Jane Austen, William Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Dorothy Sayers
**Schools Attended:** Franciscan University of Steubenville, OH
**Degrees:** BA English: Literature & Drama

**Short Stories:**
"Better Seen Than Heard," Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceress Anthology XIX*
"If We Shadows Have Offended," Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine* vol. 46
**Poems:**
"Vendetta," *Twilight Times*, April 2001
"Wizard on my Swingset," *The Wandering Troll*, January 2001
"Scintilla," *Fantasy, Folklore and Fairytales*, May 2000
**Articles:**
"The Art of Story Telling (Series)," *Writer's Exchange Magazine*, Winter/Spring 2001

**Website URL:**
"The Christian Guide to Fantasy"
"The Twelve Kingdoms" (world of *Niamh and the Hermit*)
"Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam!" (personal site)

**Q: Tell us the story of how your book was published.**
**A:** One afternoon in the summer of 2001, after having just scratched out several versions of a poem I was working on, I thought I'd try to break my writer's block by scribbling down the beginning of a novel. The idea, which had been percolating in my brain for a little over two years by that point, simply bubbled over from my head to my pen and from thence to the page, and before a few hours were over, I had the rudiments of what is the first chapter in my novel, "Niamh and the Hermit."

Around the time I had written a good fifty pages or so of the manuscript, I was contacted

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by Arx Publishing. In the past, I had reviewed their books for them, and they were wondering if I'd be interested in reading their latest book, *The Mask of Ollock*. I wrote back that, naturally, I'd be charmed...and then thought, well, why not? And added onto that note a query for the novel I'd just begun.

The folks at Arx Pub were willing to take a look at the sample I had, and it wasn't long after that, that there were talks of contracts and whatnots. However, what loomed greatest in *my* mind, was that now I'd have to *finish* the durn book!

Because of the singular nature of my relationship with Arx to begin with, I did not require the assistance of an agent (other than Providence, that is!) And truth be told, working directly with Claudio and Tony has been not only one of the most pleasant, but also one of the most encouragingly artistic experiences I've ever encountered. Arx is particularly interested in promoting quality work, and the folks there will stop at nothing to make one hone their craft to the best it can be.

**Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?**
**A:** I can honestly say that were it not for the net, *Niamh* should not have come out! The greater communication certainly helps draw together those "in the biz," and as such is a good tool for gaining contacts, building relationships, etc. in the professional field.

Yet not all of the net is business centered. My first two *completed* novels were written during one depressing year I spent in cubicle-world. There, I discovered fanfic (specifically Austen fanfic), and also discovered that writing in smaller segments with feedback from one's readers really helps keep the creative juices rolling! Sound familiar? It's how Dickens and Hugo would have written, among others.

As a fan myself, I've been grateful that I can write directly to those authors I admire, and converse with them on the craft, on their writings, and on daily goings on. None of this would have been as possible without the net. Thank God for it!

**Q: Do you have any favorite characters (your own characters)?**
**A:** Oh, good golly, yes. My sister is teasing me that I keep writing characters that I fall in love with. *sighs* I could list several from my other books—the revolutionary Poityr Reven and the cynical Mr. Eduard Delford spring to mind—but from *Niamh and the Hermit* a guard named Liam mac Hwyach has quite stolen my heart. I think it's his sheer stubborn-headed sense of duty in the face of all odds that intrigues me. He is a very model of fortitude.

I also have a soft spot for the character of Elowen, Donell's daughter, Niamh's cousin. She's really rather too passionate—if I met her in real life, there's a good chance I'd whack her upside the head before long—but nonetheless, she was such an utter joy to write, to watch her flail about with the best intentions and utter prideful stupidity, to see her desperate for such-and-such an outcome, and to know what the outcome would be and how charmingly fruitless all her passion was.

The best characters are, as any author will tell you, the ones who have such a forceful personality, that they simply stand up and start acting without any reference to what YOU, the author, thinks would be good for them to do. In fact, the characters can sometimes get downright stubborn about their plot or dialogue and refuse to move or speak again until the author gives in! It's quite an insight into the mind of God—humbling really. Am I an Elowen, expending hot tears on something that would better require a good night's sleep? Only God knows.

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**Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?**
**A:** Reading great authors, primarily. When anyone first starts writing, there tends to be a certain amount of "copycatting"—like art students who paint a Michaelangelo to study his brush strokes and composition. The "break through" comes when one finds one's own voice, when the author one has been emulating becomes a guide, a patron saint, more than an inspiration or original.

Victor Hugo is, without a doubt, the author who first inspired me to aim for the True, the Good and the Beautiful. Even though I was only in eighth grade when I first read, "Les Miserables," his haunting scenes of Eponine as she lies dying in Marius's arms, of Jean Valjean growing too weak to even walk to the corner of the block, will stay with me. I was too young in my faith to fully grasp that novel, yet the underlying core of **hope**—of goodness, justice and mercy, of God in the midst of all—these resound and echo in his work. They cannot be excised. To me, he embodies Phil. 4:8, the True, the Good and the Beautiful.

My teachers also formed me. I was blessed to have fabulous English teachers from elementary school on. In third grade, I was allowed to write chapters leading up to a longer story during the writing section of the day. So while the other students were composing the day's essay on "What I did on my summer vacation," etc. I was writing some truly dreadful and rambling chapters, much filled with silly names and places, whose spelling my teacher couldn't correct! In middle school, I was graced with a teacher who taught me everything under the sun about grammar, and also encouraged me to write creatively. This was followed by a high school replete with amazing English teachers who allowed me to weasel my way onto every publication the school offered, to learn how to self-edit. Writing well is half nature, half craft. My teachers guided me in the latter.

And then my family has always been incredibly supportive. From the interminable manuscripts I sent out in high school, to the hours I shut myself in my room writing, my family has always encouraged me, critiqued me, consoled me when I was rejected and celebrated when I was published. Indeed, *Niamh and the Hermit* is set in the world that my little brother "commissioned" when I refused to read him the same bedtime books over and over again, and offered to make up stories for him instead.

**Q: What have you been reading lately?**
**A:** I just picked up George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, which I am enjoying mightily. I bought his other novels and, once I'm done with my current play, I'll be delving into those!

Patricia McKillip also just came out with a new novel. I'll read pretty much anything by McKillip Her worldbuilding, let alone her very sentences, are sheer poetry.

**Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?**
**A:** That depends on what time of year it is. When I wrote *Niamh* I spent about 6-8 hours/ day writing. However, since I've been teaching, my writing time has been pared down to approximately 2 hours/day. Of course, if I'm in the middle of an engaging project (or if I have a deadline!), I simply *find* the time to sit my caboose down in front of my keyboard.

**Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?**
**A:** Hmmm, a variety of things. Listed in no particular order:

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• I clean. This is so distasteful to me, that I'm frequently back to my laptop before the dust can settle again!

• I work on another project—writing, directing, poetry, drawing, composing, choreographing, whatever. Sometimes working on something unrelated allows that part of your brain that's still engaged in the current project to sort itself out.

• I talk it out, either by grabbing a friend or family member and making them listen to me ramble, by doing the same via the web, or sometimes by plunking said friend or family member before my laptop and dictating. One of the chapters for *Niamh* was completed in the latter fashion, in fact! I found I couldn't think at all, but with someone else waiting for me to dictate, I found myself feeling guilty for procrastinating!

• If worse comes to worse, or rather if it's a nice day, I go for a walk. A brisk mile or so in non-recycled air does wonders for the creative glands.

**Q: Many fantasy novels these days have strong adult themes (violence, language, sexual situations). Your work has been described as being tame in comparison. What is your opinion on this issue and how does it affect your writing?**
**A:** My opinion on "adult themes" is that IF they are necessary to the action, then they should be put in. However, if they are in the novel, they needn't be gratuitously graphic. Now, obviously one can think of a dozen examples—such as *Schindler's List*—where graphic IS necessary. Yes, indeed. But that is a very rare case.

From my own experience in theatre, what works best is actually *suggesting* rather more than point-by-point showing of *any* material—whether it be "adult themed" or expository information. Example: when I directed Oscar Wilde's "Salome," about the beheading of John the Baptist, there was sex, violence, you name it, it was there AND a bag of chips. BUT, what made it so powerful as a work of art, was that all that sex, violence, etc. was *implied*. The brain is a marvelous organ—it can fill in details quite readily. And so to merely have Salome twine her arms around a column and then slide down to her knees, while telling John the Baptist that she longs for him, elicited far more shudders than if she had ripped off her clothes and launched herself at the poor guy.

In the same way, I approach writing. What sort of novel is this? What tone does it call for? *Niamh* calls for a higher tone, which is more interested in ideas and human interactions than grit. Conversely, I've another (as of yet, incompleted) novel, *whose very plot*—being about a revolution—is far more violent than *Niamh*. The book dictates what is required. Ability to sketch shadowy, yet strong, images of those "adult themes" is required by the dictates of good taste.

And most of all, no matter *what* ends up in the novel in the way of "adult themes," the most important thing is to make the True, the Good and the Beautiful more appealing, more triumphant, more victorious than those other hollow playthings. "Adult themes" are the mere shallow, selfish versions of their grander counterparts. Violence is but a mean cousin to the Church Triumphant; sex is but a part of the awesome, weighty beauty of marital love. For Heaven's sake! Write about grandeur, rather than bedeck squalor. Show things for what they *are* rather than "greywash" everything, with occasional patches of darker black! Hrumph!

# Tiger Hearts
## By A.M. Stickel

Rij, Maharajah of Markej, decided to go hunting. He called for his elephants and their mahouts, his spearmen and beaters. Taking enough supplies for several days, off they went into the jungle, leaving a mess everywhere they went.

Waugh had just eaten lunch. Well hidden in the undergrowth, the Tiger Lord was rudely awakened from his afternoon nap by the hunters' passing.

"This time old Rij has gone too far," roared the tiger in the language of cats. "I'll have to teach him a lesson he'll never forget."

Up over the palace wall leapt the tiger. Most of Rij's men being gone, Waugh was free to roam about as he pleased. But he did not leave a mess or announce himself, for he was tidy and cautious too. Prowling made him hungry again. So he paused to eat the two large eunuchs who had fallen asleep while supposedly guarding the entrance to Rij's harem. The eunuchs were succulent enough that he needed another nap. First, though, being particular about his appearance and also sensitive to heat, Waugh swam in the palace pond, shook himself off, and licked his coat dry. Ignoring a pond lily atop his large head, he returned to the eunuchs' cushions, curled up on them, and was snoring in no time.

**"This time old Rij has gone too far," roared the tiger in the language of cats. "I'll have to teach him a lesson he'll never forget."**

During his sound sleep, a crowd of Rij's wives and children came forth to admire Waugh, since he looked so peaceful. The Maharajah had a wife for each day of the year and, thus, a whole army of children.

"What a lovely lily-wearing tiger," said one wife, stepping boldly forward to bend over and pet the sensitive spots behind the tiger's ears that bring sweet dreams.

"How well groomed he is, although the tassel of his tail could do with a nice combing," said another, plying her ivory comb to gently tease out tail tangles.

Two of Rij's half-grown daughters, identical twins, giggled as they painted all of Waugh's claw tips with henna. "What a perfect birthday gift from Father!" they said.

Little boys and girls who had the same birthday began to cry, "You must share this tiger. He is for us, too." They brought out colored silk ribbons and tied tiny bows around tufts of Waugh's fur. Soon the tiger looked like he was made from a rainbow.

Several of the women went to the cooks for spicy food and marzipan. Another wife prepared a tub of tea with honey and cream. Yet another fetched a big pot of steaming rice and a tray of fragrant flat bread. All were determined to treat their lordly pet even better than the Maharajah himself.

"Waugh-waugh-ooh-waugh!" warned the tiger, awakened by the smell of food. When his yawn showed his gleaming teeth at first, the harem crowd stepped back.

"He is only smiling in pleasurable anticipation of our provender," said the chief wife. "Let us see what he chooses first. The one who brought it will be the first to ride him."

Waugh arose and shook off the ribbons. He tried to lick away the henna, but its taste

continued on page 49

# Page Turners
## Deep Magic Looks at Books

By now, you should be used to reading our book reviews here in Deep Magic. Month after month, our reviewers examine current and classic fantasy and science fiction novels. But what if you want to go back and read past reviews? Of course, you can always open up the old issues. But we have a better way. We are proud to introduce our new Book Reviews website! This website contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. And keep your eyes out, because we just may offer reviews on the website that never show up here in the e-zine.

As an added bonus, the Book Reviews website also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do it register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Go to the Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

## Fires of the Faithful
### By Naomi Kritzer

Some fantasy novels create worlds that are hauntingly familiar to our medieval past. In her debut novel *Fires of the Faithful*, Naomi Kritzer paints vividly with those themes. It is a world of Italian-sounding place-names and characters, where a pseudo-Christian religion called the Old Way is systematically persecuted by the powers at be: the Emperor (the ruler), the Circle (the council of mages), and the Fedeli (the clergy).

Insert into this religious world a teenage violinist, Eliana. Cloistered at the conservatory in Bascio, she trains and studies to join an ensemble at court, the glamorous Imperial city of Cuore. But things are not right in the land and everyone who can summon a witchlight knows it. War and famine torment the families of all the students, but the rote observances of the dominant religion must still be observed. In some instances, under pain of death.

After a student is murdered and Eliana's best friend is abruptly removed from Bascio, she decides the time has come to give up her dreams of Cuore and return to her family in the hinterlands. But she discovers too late that war and famine have scarred her homeland forever. The Circle has destroyed outlying villages who harbor refugees, and so Eliana must seek the prison-camp of Ravenna to find any trace of her childhood. In Ravenna, she becomes the leader of a movement determined to throw off the Circle and the Fedeli and practice the Old Way again. But how can a disorganized camp of refugees defeat the power of a hardened military taskmaster and his soldiers? Her childhood in the country and training at the conservatory have given her more experience than one would expect from one with her years.

Kritzer's world is full of Catholic symbolism and mythology, which shouldn't surprise us considering her undergraduate degree in religion. The parallels are a bit heavy-handed (Gésu and the betrayer Giudas, the Mass, New Testament-like quotes as chapter headers, etc.) but I did not feel the book was preachy. If anything it made the setting more *familiar* and easy to settle into. I enjoyed the first third of the book the best, because the depiction of life at the conservatory and the characters there was more compelling than Eliana's journey south. The time spent in the prison-camp Ravenna was not as interesting to me, as Eliana's evolution from a violinist student to a war general was not altogether convincing. I kept expecting the first part of the story (the conservatory scenes) to tie in better with the conclusion. It did not, but

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I guess that means I'll have to read the sequel, which concludes Eliana's story - *Turning the Storm*.

*Possible objectionable material: language is strong at times, but not excessive. There were two disturbing execution scenes, though they were not overdone. And finally, the reader is gradually shown that Eliana's sexual preferences lean towards her own sex, but she never acts out any of these inclinations nor are there any intimate scenes depicted throughout the novel.*

*(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)*

## Book Review: Classic Sci-Fi

# When Worlds Collide and After Worlds Collide

### By Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie

We are not alone in space. Even if you do not believe in the possibility of alien races, you'll have to admit to comets, meteors, planets, stars, and galaxies. With all that material out there, it's only a matter of time before one of them hits planet earth. Indeed, we're being bombarded by little bits all the time; occasionally one of them is large enough to create large-scale destruction, such as Meteor Crater in Arizona or the Siberian event of the early 20th century. So it's no surprise that the destruction of the earth by a wandering 'visitor' is one of the older tropes in science fiction.

The earliest major telling of such a story is the duology *When Worlds Collide* and *After Worlds Collide* by Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie. Originally written in 1933 and 1934, the books tell the story of the last days of earth and the first days of man's future on another planet.

In the middle of the first half of the twentieth century, astronomers have discovered that two rogue planets are on their way to earth. The first, Bronson Alpha (named after their discoverer), is about the size of Neptune. The smaller planet, Bronson Beta, is similar to the earth in size. As they come into the solar system, gravitational forces are going to trap them into an orbit. When they first enter, they are going to pass near enough to the earth to cause incredible destruction, wiping out most of the population. But it's the second pass that's going to destroy the earth, for in that second pass, the earth will be right in the way of Bronson Alpha. The gravitational forces are going to destroy the earth.

But salvation lies in the fact that the smaller planet, Bronson Beta, is far enough away that it won't be caught in the dance of death between its larger sibling and the earth. And because of the gravitational tango, it will be caught around the sun in an orbit fairly similar to earth's.

And so the race is on among the scientists and great thinkers of earth to develop space arks to transport as many people from earth to Bronson Beta before the end. After the first pass of the Bronson bodies, however, the darker side of man's nature emerges and things don't go too well.

Since there is a sequel, it's not too telling to reveal that some humans do manage to make it to Bronson Beta. But how many? And are they all friendly? What about the whole issue of having to re-start an entire planet's ecosystem? And if that weren't enough, the former denizens of the planet have left a lot of their civilization mostly intact. So intact that the pilgrims have to quickly ask whether the original denizens are still there or if they are coming back.

These books, as you can tell from their dates, were written at the beginning of what has come to be known as the Golden Age of science fiction. As such, there's quite a sense of wonder (or 'sensawunda,' as it's more commonly known now). Also, even though it was written after WWI, there's still a strong sense of the ability of man and his technological prowess to overcome anything that stands in his way. But even so, Wylie and Balmer were not entirely enraptured with man's ability to overcome. This is what makes these books stand out from others of the time: it doesn't blindly accept man's dominance over his environment. Throughout the books there's a distinct sense that man is but a part of the universe and that that universe is controlled by a sovereign deity.

Because of the era in which they were written, there are scenes that would strike our more politically correct sensibilities as racist, but even the racial caricatures are

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seen to have more depth than political correct thinking would lead us to think. These are not the exceptions that prove the rule, but the realities that disprove it.

First and foremost, though, these books are fun, good clean fun. They are no longer in print, but used copies aren't too hard to find. I highly recommend finding them for an enjoyable few hours' read.

*Possible objectionable material: none*

*(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)*

## Book Review: Fantasy
## The Briar King
### By Greg Keyes

Back in the distant past (that's how all good fantasies start, isn't it?) humans were enslaved to the Skasloi, demon-like creatures that ruled the world. However, there came from the south a woman by the name of Virginia Dare who defeated the Skasloi and liberated the humans. Now, many years later, the Dares are still ruling in one of the liberated kingdoms, but the aristocracy has become aged and stale and there is much political turmoil.

Willem Dare is the current king of Crotheny, but his bloodline is weak and so is he as king, being easily swayed by his advisers. There is hope, however, in his daughters, the youngest of whom is Anne, who is strong-willed and possesses the ability to speak with the spirit world.

And that is a power that is currently needed, for some of the dire prophecies of old appear to be coming to pass. The great Briar King, it was foretold, would return as the harbinger of death should the King's Forest be neglected.

Thus begins Greg Keyes' new fantasy series, "The Kingdoms of Thorn and Bone." I have not heard how many novels the series will be to tell its complete story, but Keyes has in the past shown great ability to maintain a strong story across multiple books (most notably in his "Age of Unreason" series of four books) while still making each book satisfying.

*The Briar King* varies between being a competent first book and being a compelling first book. One of the problems that faces most authors of multiple-book epics is that there is a lot of exposition that needs to be put forth in order to tell the story well. It takes immense skill, however, not to bog the story down in early details. Keyes manages to do that, but still it takes most of the length of the book to make the characters interesting. It's not until the story kicks into full gear in the latter half of the book that the characters come to life. Until then, the characters take second stage to the plot. For it is a complex plot that Greg Keyes is weaving. Even by the end of this first installment, there are already indications that there is a huge story being revealed. When you turn the last page, the basic forward action of the novel has been resolved, but there is still many mysteries to resolve. Thankfully, this book doesn't end *in media res*, but it is definitely not a stand alone. I look forward to the next installment.

*Possible objectionable material: mild violence and sexuality.*

*(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)*

## Book Review: Science Fiction
## Saturn
### By Ben Bova

Earth has been through a series of environmental disasters. These disasters enabled fundamental religious groups to gain control of government. Everything on Earth is now strictly regulated. The Fundamentalists in charge believe this is for the good and survival of society, but others disagree. Intellectuals and others believe the restrictions curtail necessary personal freedoms. Many of these freethinkers and

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troublemakers are in prison.

The International Consortium of Universities has arranged an expedition to study Saturn and it's giant moon Titan. Microscopic life has been discovered on Titan.

Many of Earth's governments are encouraging so-called dissidents to leave Earth to participate. The massive habitat Goddard will transport 10,000 scientists, dissidents and intellectuals to Saturn. This trip will take over two years.

The real purpose for the trip is unknown to the participants. It is an anthropological experiment. The habitat has a self-sufficient ecology, and a self-contained economy. People from most racial and religious groups are participating. Backers for this experiment are anxious to see what form of society will emerge under these conditions.

I found this story interesting and easy to read. The plot makes sense, but isn't completely predictable. The characters are believably written and consistent throughout the story. I liked it, but I'm not rushing out to get another of his works.

Ben Bova has won the Hugo Award six times, and written over a hundred books. You can visit his website at www.benbova.net.

*Possible objectionable material: One of the characters enjoys pornography. This is pertinent to the plot, but Bova doesn't dwell on it or describe it graphically.*

*(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)*

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# The Geek's Guide to Grammar
## Me, I, and the Rest of the World

Did your mother ever say to you, "It's not Jim and me, it's Jim and I!" Well, if she didn't, I'm sure someone in your life has. Unfortunately, as right as she may have been in that instance, she just may have ruined you on the proper usage of "Jim and me."

**RULE: when referring to yourself in addition to another, use 'I' when you are part of the subject and 'me' when you are part of the direct or indirect object.**

Let's assume for the sake of examples that I, Uther the Black Knight, am currently on an adventure of epic proportions with my trusty sidekick, Thadeous.

`Thadeous and I are headed to small hamlet for dinner.` Simple, right? This is where your mother comes in. How many kids would say something like: `Thadeous and me are headed to the small hamlet for dinner.` or perhaps more common: `Me and Thadeous are headed to the small hamlet for dinner.` It happens all the time. Simple test: take Thadeous out of the sentence. How would it read? `I am headed to the…` or `Me is headed to the…`

It gets more complicated. Is this sentence right? `The old man gave Thadeous and I some complicated directions to the dragon's lair.` Correct? No, but it's a very, very common mistake. 'Thadeous and I' is the indirect object in this sentence (the directions are being given to us). Read the sentence without Thadeous in it. `The old man gave I some complicated directions…` Of course, that's not correct. The sentence above should read: `The old man gave Thadeous and me complicated directions…`

Let's try another. `The dragon slapped the tree with his tail, hoping to topple it on top of Thadeous and I.` Again, this would be wrong. Take out Thadeous and the tree would be toppling "on top of I." "Thadeous and I" should read "Thadeous and me." Here are a few more examples, labeled as right or wrong.

`Me and the hairy monster fought to the death.` Not correct
`The dragon breathed fire on Thadeous, the maiden, and me.` Correct
`The sheriff sent out some thugs to kill Thadeous and I.` Not correct
`The maiden and I rode off into the sunset together.` Correct

So that's it. If you are ever in doubt, simply remove the others from the sentence until you are left with either 'me' or 'I.' Whichever one sounds correct is the one you include with the others in the sentence. Oh, and out of courtesy, you should always list the others before yourself! (Thadeous and me, not me and Thadeous.)

### Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue.
EMAIL THE GEEK

# Artist Profile
## Jesus Garcia

Jesus is 32 years old and has been working professionally for 12 years. He studied Graphic Design at the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana and has worked for several publishers in Mexico (cover art for books, Sci-Fi, Fantasy and Esoterism).

**Titles**
Top Left: *Alas de Fuego*
Bottom Left: *El Dragon de Oro*
Bottom Right: *El Mar Negro*

# Sleepwalkers
## By Jeff Wheeler

Jod was hefting a sack of barley seeds from the cellar shelf when his uncle's voice called from the ladder fork above.

"Fetch my sword, Jod. Hurry, lad."

His heart raced and his mouth went dry. It could only mean one thing - the rebels were scouting from Pythian Road. Instead of answering his uncle he dropped the sack hard, ignoring the seed spilling from a tear, and clambered up the rungs. As he reached the top, he saw his uncle nearby staring down the road, dark eyes watchful, his beard ends quivering as he grit his teeth and shuddered. For a man leaner than a dock-post, Uncle Reath had a grip as tight as his hitch-knots. His hand clamped on Jod's shoulder.

"Just the blade. Not the bow. Hurry!"

Jod sprinted across the yard, sending ducks winging and Nobs barking. He heard the fear in Uncle Reath's voice, and he didn't know anything that could make a woodsman like his uncle afraid. He raced up the stone steps of the stoop, and past the lonesome rocker. As he bangd open the cabin's solid door, Aunt Roe looked up from a mound of dough up to her elbows, her dark hair and cheek dusted with flour.

**Jod sprinted across the yard, sending ducks winging and Nobs barking. He heard the fear in Uncle Reath's voice, and he didn't know anything that could make a woodsman like his uncle afraid.**

"Jod?"

He ran to the far wall and grabbed the scabbard off the pegs.

"Rebels?"

"I don't know! Uncle said fetch the sword." Jod raced past her again, hurtling across the porch. Uncle Reath stood by the dockpost, Nobs at his heel sniffing the brush, and he stared down the dirt embankment leading down to Pythian Road, the main highway to the Emperor's city.

A man in a dusty black cloak lurched towards them.

The fellow was hooded, but something metal glinted on his chest. Jod brought the weapon to Uncle Reath, who took it from him silently and slung his arm through the scabbard strap. Its wide hilt jutted above his shoulder. Jod chewed his lip and a shiver ran down his back. He gripped his belt knife. Glancing around, he saw the axe stuck in the chopping block and started for it, but Uncle Reath gripped his shoulder again - hard enough it hurt. The stranger's shadow angled sharply to one side. Jod's heart hammered in his chest.

Uncle Reath stared at the approaching man, his eyes narrowing. He rubbed his whiskers. "If there's trouble, Jod, get back in the house and bolt the doors and shutters."

"What about the boat?"

"Mind me, boy. Take Nobs by the collar. Hold him tight."

Jod grabbed the leather collar. Why wasn't the dog snarling at the stranger? Folk rarely wandered up into the Westfall. A few trappers during the winter months, a few traders looking for a meal and a chance to sell buttons, fish hooks, or blades. The stranger didn't look like *that*

continued on 52

continued from page 10

You can't just…just…you can't *do* that! If you won't talk to me, and you won't move for me, I don't see why I ought to let you act all con-dess-ending at me like that! See?" The lemon's smug exterior gave way to an aura of bashful apology.

But there was something else…why the smugness? What was in the barn?

The hay! Mina almost crushed the lemon in her fist right there. It was the hay! The lemon wanted to escape, of course. If it could just happen to 'fall' from her hand at the right moment, she would never find it.

"Ohhh," she said with a growl, furious, and marched straight out of the barn. "You can't fool me that easy. Huh, you think I'm stoopid, well, you've got another one coming, mister."

"Something wrong, hon?" asked Pa. "You yelled."

"I'm fine. This here lemon tried to trick me, Pa—"

"You don't say." He surveyed the yard, and then looked back at Mina. "Here, I've got a very important job for you…"

* * *

Mina scattered the slug-repellant with wide, angry strokes. Under her breath she said every mean thing she could think of to the lemon. It was all its fault for making her yell. She was careful to check on the lemon often. Even though her apron pocket was deep, she knew this was one desperate fruit. Who could tell what manner of scheming went on in its seedy brain?

She paused, pulled out the lemon to check on it again. Her face purpled with rage as she looked at it. "Oh no you don't! *No you don't*! If *I* have to work, *you* have to work." She slapped it once, hard, and dropped it back in her apron.

"What was that, dear?"

"Nothing," Mina called back. "The lemon was trying to take a nap, and we're not done yet." She sneezed. The fumes from the slug-repellant were getting quite strong.

"Lunch is ready anyway. You can finish with the slugs after you eat."

Mina dropped the bag of slug-repellant gratefully and headed to the kitchen. After washing her hands she sat and ate, inserting all the proper please's and thank you's between frequent checks on the lemon. It stayed where it was for now. It was probably just waiting for the perfect moment of distraction to make a beeline for the door. She wondered how fast it could move.

"So, hon, beating those slugs back?" Pa asked, grinning. He knew he hadn't fooled her with the 'very important job' line, but he also knew that this was what fathering was all about. "How goes the battle?"

"I haven't seen any slugs," Mina replied glumly. "And the lemon is a lazy brute. It won't help *at all*." She checked on the lemon again. Still there. It was asleep again. "Hmph."

"My, but you're fidgety today," said Mum, concerned. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Maybe I should finish up with the slug war," said Pa. "You look a little pale." He leaned forward and squinted at Mina's face.

"I'm fine," she insisted, squirming uneasily. The only thing worse than being assigned a task by Pa was having him take one over. It always made her feel guilty, like she'd disappointed him somehow. "I can do it myself."

* * *

The afternoon passed quickly enough, and Mina finished scattering the slug repellant not only in the front yard, but the back as well. While she worked, she rethought her theories regarding the lemon. It couldn't really be a prince. A prince would have tried to communicate in some way. If it was under a curse it would want help, right? But perhaps it wasn't a cursed *prince*. Maybe it was a cursed pirate! A pirate wouldn't want to reveal himself; she could squash him with one hand in his current condition.

Or was it a she? What, exactly, was the difference between a he-lemon and a she-lemon? She knew about horses and pigs, but she'd never paid much attention to lemons. It was puzzling; there didn't seem to be any obvious signs. Presumably *they* knew the difference.

"Ah!" she cried. That was it then! The lemon wanted to go home to his wife. Or her husband. That was why it was trying so hard. A wave of pity swelled in her heart. She would let it go; that would be the right thing to do.

"Time for dinner, dear!" Mum called from the house.

"After dinner," Mina promised, whispering. She carried the lemon inside. "I finished the lawns," she told Mum as she set the lemon on the counter to wash her hands. "And I've decided… I've decided to release the lemon back into the wild, where it belongs." She wiped away a tear. It would be so happy to go home, she knew.

Pa said grace, and they sat down to a dinner of mashed potatoes and fried slug. The Gnome Slug was quite good if prepared right; you had to be very careful to get all the pointy bits out, but there was a fair amount of meat on them, and nary a bone in sight. Mina dug in, rolling each bite of slug in the potatoes until they were completely coated.

"Mmm," she said. "Thank you, Mum, it's delicious." As she brought another bite to her mouth, movement behind Pa caught her attention. She froze with the fork partially inside her mouth.

The lemon was moving. She had forgotten it; it was still on the counter. There was nothing surreptitious about its movement this time. It was rolling, bold as could be, toward the edge. Her mind vaguely registered speech. It was Pa, asking if she was all right.

"Um," she said. The lemon fell off the counter, and she forced down a gasp. It was all right though. "Yes," she said, still not entirely sure what Pa had asked. 'Yes' was probably the right answer.

"Mina, you've been acting strange all day," Mum said sharply. "Sometimes I think you're barely there."

"Yes, Mum," said Mina. She was less certain about the answer this time, and even though Mum's tone had not indicated a question, it seemed to require some response. The fork remained in between her lips, motionless.

The lemon trundled out the door and bumped down the front step. It had earned its freedom at long last. Back to the wife and kids, without a pitcher of lemonade in the foreseeable future. Just before it disappeared from sight, it paused and looked back. Mina felt like crying, she was so happy for it. She wished Mum and Pa would turn and see it, but they were too busy watching her.

Mina wasn't sure, but it looked like the lemon waved at her as it rolled out of sight.

# The End

*Steven Richards lives in Oregon, a web developer by day and fledgling author in the wee hours. In his spare time Steven writes short stories, two previously published in Deep Magic, and makes slow progress on his genre-muddling novel, 'Breakdown.' 'Barely There' was an enjoyable return to writing traditional fantasy.*

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 15

This time Everol had gone too far.

Mustering what was left of his dignity, Xinius marched down the vacant corridor toward his tower apartment. He had to change and wash before his *dear* friend saw the result of his work.

This time Everol would pay for his pranks.

* * *

Later that evening Xinius, dressed in a simple, white tunic, paused at the opening to the dining hall. It had taken him the better part of the day to clean himself, his garments, and more importantly, his many papers. He had even managed to have the book he had thrown delivered to his rooms so he could work on its restoration. Luckily, the binding had preserved much of its contents.

Once he was sure that his resplendent clothing, simple in its purity, had the desired effect, especially on those who had seen his prior appearance, he stepped inside and made his way past the nearest tables. He did not want to spoil his entrance by sitting too soon. Spotting an open table on the far side of the circle, he walked through the center cooking area, favoring those he saw with a slight smile and a nod, all carefully calculated movements to impress upon his audience the distance he applied to the day's events. He was the calm of a spring breeze amidst the chaos of open pit fires and bustling slaves.

Reaching the table he had selected, Xinius stopped and surveyed the reclining masters and students. He had always considered himself a good actor, but it took all his skill to keep a feral snarl from escaping his lips as he spied Everol lounging on a series of pillows nearby. He made no move to join his friend, dismissing Everol as if he had not seen him. Choosing a cushion that afforded him a view of his old friend, Xinius lay down, propped on one elbow so he could receive a proffered goblet of wine from a first year student.

One of the masters at Xinius' table greeted him from his reclining position, and they exchanged a few words. The talk never covered the morning's incident, but Xinius could see the curiosity in the other man's eyes, and in those of his two companions. No doubt they were waiting to see what Xinius' response would be.

Like most of the university staff, the other masters and the older students were well aware of the strange friendship Xinius and Everol shared. They were the two oldest teachers at the school, and they were both acknowledged as powerful sorcerers. Who the more powerful sorcerer was, however, continued to be open for debate. It was an academic issue, and the true answer mattered little to anyone.

Anyone, that is, except Xinius and Everol.

Xinius could still remember the day Everol brought the matter to a head. Prove it, his friend had demanded, refusing to see reason. Prove it.

Those words had lead to a simple, yet embarrassing prank, and Xinius had thought the mattered solved and his adversary sufficiently cowed. The return joke from Everol—a panther conjured in the university's baths—served as a lesson in false assumptions and humility. The sorcerous cat had not even allowed Xinius the decency of a towel as it chased him from the baths. The encounter still caused him to blush, and he quashed the memory quickly as he felt his face begin to heat up.

Of course, the contest had not ended there. Xinius could not allow that. His response—a dab of transparency ointment in the wash water holding Everol's clothes—went beyond its

desired effect. It became a declaration of war. Once his friend managed to scrounge up a new robe, he quieted Xinius' laughter with another innocuous prank; one that proved worse than the panther episode. Response, counter-response—an avalanche building to an explosive conclusion as each prank became more involved, more subtle, and of course, more embarrassing. One day it would end—it had to end. The little game Everol started had become a matter of honor, and Xinius was determined to fulfill his friend's request for proof, even if it took him until his dying breath.

Other members of the university's staff joined them at the table, filling the remaining couches as slaves served dinner, and the meal began in earnest. Xinius allowed himself to be drawn into a number of conversations, maintaining a pleasant exterior as he picked at his food. Not even the lickerfish could tempt his stone cold palate. From time to time, he eyed Everol over his goblet's rim, watching the other sorcerer as unobtrusively as he could until some comment or question demanded his attention. This continuing facade, however, became unbearable. With a loud belch, Xinius excused himself at the earliest possible moment, waving absently to his dinner companions. He walked into the night, ignoring their amused smiles.

Xinius could bear their amusement for now. He had more important concerns to occupy himself.

For some minutes he wandered, lost in his thoughts, oblivious to his surroundings. When he did stop and look around, he found his eyes adjusting to the change in light of a multitude of candles. He immediately recognized an inner reading sanctum of the university's library, deep within the confines of the library itself. Xinius blinked in surprise, wondering how he had made it past the library's columns and among the ceiling-high stacks without realizing it.

At a nearby table, a scribe looked up at him. Xinius, embarrassed at his aimless wanderings, forced his face into an expressionless stare which he directed at the man until he returned to his scroll. Satisfied, the sorcerer continued into the depths of the library, feeling the inner calm which had avoided him for the better part of day.

Xinius only glanced at the wooden shelves, stacked in a lattice up to the ceiling, as he passed them. Each held clay tablets, scrolls, and a few books. It was a hoard of indescribable wealth—worthy of a king—containing many plays, histories, philosophies, oratories, teachings, and incantations from throughout the civilized world. This last section was what interested Xinius.

The sun had set, so he met few scribes and fewer students. Most of the people who remained in the library had secluded themselves in one of the many reading chambers where ample candlelight could be found. Therefore, when he found the area he wanted, there was no one around to chastise him on the use of sorcerers' light—a free floating ball of contained fire that lighted his way, but also posed a considerable threat to the archives.

He walked to the first shelf of the section and grabbed the only scroll on it. The identifying tab held a single word: *Pinakes*. Unrolling it from the bottom, he scanned the tables, noting the titles and locations of a variety of works. He brushed through the scroll, feeling more than reading the words. Finally, he felt confident he knew where to look.

Returning the scroll to its shelf, he stepped hurriedly down one row and around a corner. At the far end of the next row he stopped, craning his neck to look at the topmost shelves. What he wanted—needed—was almost twice his height away, close to the ceiling.

Xinius cast around for one of the library's many ladders, but seeing none nearby, hesitated only a moment before placing his sandaled foot on one of the lower shelves. He was careful to avoid stepping on the varied works on each ledge, a task made easier by the small number they

contained. Levering himself to the next wooden plank, he climbed the library stack until he reached the topmost row, a good twenty hands above the floor.

The sorcerers' light floated up by his head, its faint illumination allowing him to peruse the contents of the shelves he could see. None of the identifying tabs on the few scrolls and books caught his attention. A number of clay tablets were stacked in front of him, and he would have to move them to see the colophon, or title page, of each.

He shifted his grip, moving one hand to the upper part of the stack, trying to grasp the small space between it and the ceiling. His fingers came into contact with a hard edge, surprising him so that he almost lost his balance. Struggling to regain his hold, he quested with his free hand for the item he had discovered. It felt like a clay tablet, baked hard in a kiln fire. With much effort, he managed to move the hidden object to a place where he could see it.

The writing on the hardened clay was archaic, and with his limited language skills he could not translate it. It did look eastern though, and that excited him enough to cast a small levitation spell to help lower the tablet to the floor where he could study it in more detail. Somehow, he knew it was the tablet he wanted. Once it was safely on the marble tile below, he made his own way back down the stack. It was unfortunate that the laws of magic did not allow him the same route as the tablet.

Normally, items of this nature were not allowed out of the confines of the library and the fanatical watch of the scribes. But his position as a master of the university did have its advantages. To translate the ancient writing, he had to take it back to his chambers where he could devote the time and resources to unraveling its secrets. Still, to avoid comment, Xinius grabbed a handful of scrolls from various shelves as he exited the library, stacking these on the tablet to make it less conspicuous.

A scribe at the library's entrance made as if to stop him, but a firm look was all it took to pass into the night without interruption.

* * *

"Concentrate on the cube," Everol insisted softly, looking at each of his seventh year students in turn. With the warmth of the noonday sun on their backs, he watched them close their eyes, as if sleeping. Mentally, he felt them solidifying the image of a perfect cube in their minds. "Feel its corners; the smoothness of its sides."

All things magical required a focus, and the cube was the building block upon which all else rested. Once he was sure they had the image firmly in their minds, Everol used his own abilities to rotate their cubes, twisting and sliding them in an attempt to break their concentration. He was pleased to see no one respond to his mental intrusion, or the beginning steps of the exercise that, while simple in concept, took years to master.

A movement caused him to look up. A small part of him continued to work with the students while his conscious eye followed the striding form of his friend from across the courtyard. Xinius had just exited an archway of the library after conferring with a scribe. He held a number of scrolls clasped tightly to his body, and even at this distance the strain of sleepless nights could plainly be seen on his face.

Everol had not seen his friend in days, not since his prank with the ink well. All of Xinius' time, he knew, had been devoted to a special project in the tower at the far end of the university. Idly, the sorcerer wondered if the project involved him.

When Xinius disappeared, Everol rose from the marble bench. A few discreet inquiries into

Xinius' study materials might help him understand his friend's behavior. It might also give him the edge he needed if Xinius were devising a prank of his own in retaliation.

Mentally transferring the exercise to one of his more advanced students to continue, Everol walked unhurriedly toward the scribe who still stood at the library's entrance. A few words with him, and Everol returned to his seat, a perplexed look on his face.

Without a word, he accepted control of the cube back from his student, increasing the frenzy of its movements as he did. He did not notice the first two students who lost concentration, opening their eyes downcast in embarrassment. His mind was on other things.

Xinius was no master of languages. Why, then, did he need scrolls on ancient translations?

* * *

The stylus scratched a shaky line on the reed-paper. Finished, Xinius lifted it carefully and set it down. He rubbed his eyes with ink-smudged fingers. If he had not been so tired, he would have berated his penmanship. The mess of letters and signs on the paper looked as if it belonged to a child.

But that did not matter now. The translations were complete, the ancient text revealing all its secrets through his careful study. All that remained was to act.

Despite his firm resolution, he glanced at the clay tablet with a troubled expression. The words he had painstakingly researched made him uneasy. The colophon did not worry him. It read:

One tablet. End. Spell of Amarna, High Magi to King Shurapbinal. When one becomes an Everlasting Servant. May the gods warn, only master magi shall cast this spell…

Xinius was secure in his abilities, and the warning meant nothing to him. The rest of the ancient scrawl however, studied and translated over many days, made him feel as if a thousand spiders ran riot over his skin. Not for the first time did he begin to doubt his wisdom in seeking this knowledge.

"Phah!" he shouted into the room.

Stubbornly, he pushed himself out of his chair and stumbled to where a rumpled bed sat against the wall. It was too late for second thoughts. Everol had asked that he prove his superiority. This spell would do it. Whatever the cost, he would pull this greatest of pranks. Tomorrow, he would worry about the materials the spell demanded. Now, it was time to sleep.

* * *

"Are you going to the *munera* today?"

Everol jumped at the light touch on his shoulder. He turned around, trying to calm his racing heart. "Don't do that!" he scolded. "You'll give an old man a heart attack."

Smiling widely before him was Xinius, refreshed and more energetic than the man he had seen leaving the library a few days before. "So, are you going?"

"No." Everol let a little of his irritation at being surprised show in his voice.

Xinius did not appear to hear it. "Why not?"

"Did I know him?"

"Paeratolo, a lawyer to the magistrate I believe. He came from a wealthy family."

Everol heard the meaning behind the last sentence. "How many?"

His friend shrugged as if the answer meant nothing to him. "Rumors say over a hundred

gladiators and as many wild beasts. It should be quite a show." There was a pause. "Calumaro, his nephew, is officiating."

Snapping his head up from the scroll he had returned to studying, Everol gasped. "That bloodthirsty wart? He rarely allows quarter."

"As I said, it should be quite a show. I expect a rather bountiful harvest." Xinius put a hand on Everol's arm. "Why not come with me?"

"Watching men fight and die is not a sport I enjoy," Everol said, pulling away.

"Not even when it honors the dead?"

"I doubt they care," Everol snorted. "By the way, what are you up to in your tower? I have not seen you for days at a time."

"Oh, just a little something." Xinius' smile became more secretive at the change in subject. Backing away he said, "I'll let you know soon."

Everol watched his friend leave, frowning. Some minutes passed before he thought to wonder at the 'harvest' Xinius had mentioned.

What was his friend up to?

* * *

The sun had long since set when the solitary knock on the rear tower door brought the aging sorcerer to his feet. Xinius poked his head out to eye the rough looking peasant with barely concealed disdain. Without a word, the hooded man shuffled his immense form toward the horse and covered cart he had driven to the wall of the university. With one hand, he flipped over the tarp to show the sorcerer what he had.

Even from his position at the door, and the faint light cast by the torches on the university's walls, Xinius could easily make out the pile of shapes in the cart's bed. He almost recoiled at the stench and the sight, and it was an effort not to let the bile rise in his throat. Screwing up his courage, he left the safety of the tower and approached the cart for a closer inspection. As he looked over the specimens, he listened to the muttered words of the cart driver. The sum the man asked for was outrageous by any standard, but Xinius did not argue. He reached inside his tunic, removed a small sack of coins, and handed them to the cloaked figure.

After weighing the sack a moment, the driver asked another question. Xinius jerked a hand at the door, not daring to speak. Nodding, the man bent down and lifted a bundle from under the tarp. He had to struggle to get it over his shoulder, but once he had succeeded it was a simple matter for him to walk the short distance through the tower door, reappearing a moment later without his cargo. Three trips later, it was done. The peasant drove off without another word from the sorcerer.

Xinius grimaced at the task before him, but he knew procrastination would only make it worse. Looking along the walls of the university, he made sure no one had seen the clandestine delivery before he went back into his tower, locking and warding the door behind him.

* * *

Everol walked across the courtyard alone. He patted his stomach and belched again at the filling meal he had just eaten, grimacing at the slight aftertaste in his mouth. That grimace turned to a frown as he looked in the direction of Xinius' tower.

What was his friend up to?

It had now been a week since he had last seen Xinius. That had been right before the gladiatorial matches in the city. He was not the only one noticing Xinius' absence. The students were beginning to talk, as were a number of masters and university staff. Avoiding cultured company was unnatural, some were saying. There was speculation the aging master was sick in the mind.

Pondering whether he should visit his friend and make sure he was well, Everol decided against it for the moment. A light shone in a window high up the tower. That would be Xinius' workshop. If his friend was working, Everol could stand all night banging on the door without an answer.

He would give Xinius two more days. After that, he would break into the tower, if necessary, to check on his friend.

* * *

It was done.

Almost.

Xinius sat in the chair gazing at his workshop table, hands on his knees. His whole body felt tense with anticipation. Only one more ingredient remained to complete the spell.

He needed a human soul—the purest essence of life.

* * *

Rapping his knuckles loudly on the tower's door, Everol fumed. Xinius had not answered his previous three attempts, and his considerable patience was growing thin. Behind him, he could feel the eyes of students and faculty as they crossed the courtyard, at once curious and full of humor at his futile efforts. Nearby, two slaves used their rakes to break up the dirt of the masters' herb garden. One of them stood up and muttered something to his companion while he cast a meaningful glance at Everol and Xinius' tower. The second slave nodded in response, but seeing Everol's scowl, redoubled his efforts against an offending weed.

Everol swore under his breath, stopping to consider his options. What was Xinius up to? With little thought to the consequences, he reached into the pouch at his waist and withdrew a fresh, pink rose petal. He fingered it for a moment, considering. With a sigh, he made up his mind.

"Under the rose, all is secret," he murmured. "Under no rose, all is revealed."

Gripping the silky petal in both hands, he tore it in two and slapped the pieces against the door. Immediately, he felt the privacy spell Xinius had placed on the door disappear with a snap like a taut bowstring stretched beyond its limits. If Xinius would not answer knocks at his door, perhaps he would take notice at the disappearance of a few of his wards.

As Everol waited a faint sound reached his ears, muffled by the thick door and stone walls. Everol tilted his head, listening carefully, then with a grimace abandoned some of his dignity and pressed an ear to the door, ignoring the astounded looks of a trio of passing students. All of his concentration remained focused on hearing the sound again.

When it came, there was no doubt what it was. A crash—shattering glass—followed by a shriek of anger and flurry of curses assaulted Everol's ears. Xinius kept shelves of glassware in his laboratory, some quite priceless. When Xinius broke a piece, he would remind Everol for days at a time of the loss, lamenting it like a lost child. Everol shook his head, imagining the curses

his friend was inventing as he looked down on the shards of glass at his feet.

Another shattering sound came, followed by more angry shouts. Just as Everol shook his head, a grin starting to crease his lips, a shriek tore out through the door as if the wood was not there. Stunned, Everol backed away from the wooden planks, his breath catching in his throat.

That sound had come from a human throat, but it was not human in origin.

A second shriek broke from the tower, sending those few masters and students still in the courtyard scuttling for cover. Everol stood his ground, trying to decide what to do. Finally, he brought a small sorcerers' light into being and concentrated on increasing its heat, feeding its fire as fast as his will would allow. Another crash of glassware and bellow of pain spurred Everol into action.

The sorcerers' light flew towards the heavy door, expanding as it crossed the small intervening space until it disappeared against the wood, leaving a man-sized, melted hole in its place. Everol felt the snap of multiple wards as he quickly entered the tower. He waved a hand, and the remaining wards dissipated before him. Pausing to allow his eyes to adjust to the gloom, Everol gaped at the destruction he saw.

The room was a mass of broken glass and splintered furniture. Next to the stairs that led to the upper rooms a shattered mirror hung on one support. A thin trail of blood ran up the stairs, and Everol moved cautiously to follow it, straining his ears for any sounds.

A shout and an inhuman screech from above drove him up the spiraling steps faster than caution allowed. He reached the top, ducking instinctively to avoid a vase that shattered above his head. Eyes wide, Everol searched for his attacker. What he saw almost caused him to double over in laughter.

Before him, half his back to Everol, stood a half-naked giant of a man, the crisscrossed lattice of many wounds scarring his back, shoulders, legs and arms. Many of the wounds looked freshly stitched, and caked blood showed where old wounds had reopened. The man stood immobile, a wondrous look on his face as he gazed into cupped hands twice the size of Everol's. Light from the room's single window glanced off the twinkling pieces of glass in those hands, casting a spray of colors over the body and walls. On one of the massive arms his friend hung, clawing for purchase.

"Give me that!" Xinius demanded, struggling to reach the hands and the prize they held. His disheveled hair gave Xinius a crazed, desperate look. A small, blood-soaked bandage dangled from his left hand.

With a shrug as if he were dislodging a fly, the giant pulled his arm free of the sorcerer. Xinius landed on his rear, the hard wood floor echoing with a thud to match his grunt of pain. The movement was enough to move the glass pieces out of the morning's rays. The prismatic display ended, and the giant man moaned in sadness. Opening his hands, he let the glass pieces fall. Everol caught a quick glimpse of delicately molded figures, a man, a woman and two children, before they hit the floor, joining the growing number of shards that littered the wood.

"Not the cristalleria." Defeat filled Xinius' voice. He looked at the broken figure. "I'm sorry, Mother."

Everol waited for the giant to move before he crossed the floor to help his friend stand up. "What's happening?"

Xinius answered with a wild gesture at his smashed laboratory. "What does it look like? The troll is making a mess." He stopped suddenly and looked at Everol, eyebrows raised. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't you feel me breaking your wards?"

"I have been a tad busy of late," his friend responded acerbically. His look changed to one of horror and he started from Everol's grasp. "Not my potions!" The tingling of more glass filled the room. Xinius' shoulders slumped. "It's going to take me years to replace those." He drew himself up, a determined look on his face. "Well, don't just stand there. Now that you're here, help me stop that moving landmass before he does more damage."

Everol opened his mouth to respond, but Xinius dismissed him, striding quickly to place himself in front of the lumbering man before he could reach a row of closed cabinets that lined the far wall. His gaze fixated on something beyond the tiny sorcerer, the giant man brushed Xinius aside, despite the protests and abuse Xinius hurled at him. As one arm moved the sorcerer out of his way the man turned, and the light from the window caught along the ridges of his arm and torso, casting broken, misshapen shadows. Everol snapped his mouth shut as he finally understood what was happening. The arm did not belong to the face of the giant, nor did the torso belong to either of them. Abruptly, the stitches he had seen earlier made sense, and a pit of dread filled his stomach.

"You created a golem!" Everol shouted at Xinius.

"So you noticed," his friend shouted back, grabbing a broken chair and swinging it at the back of the towering creature. The wood broke against taut muscles without noticeable affect.

"Careful, or you may cause it to throw a tantrum," Everol warned, his mind racing through all he remembered of the magical creatures.

Xinius stood in stunned silence for a moment, forgetting the golem's approach to the cabinets. "A tantrum? What do you think this is?" he asked incredulously, waving at the room. "It's acting like a child!"

"It is a child," Everol countered, remembering something from many years before.

"Is it?" Xinius gave this some thought, his eyes burning as he watched the mountainous form stop to rip a cabinet door from its hinges. Inside, it found a metal goblet which it took and raised high above the floor, dropping it with a resounding clatter. Losing interest in the dented cup, it turned back to the cabinets looking for more interesting items.

"Oh no you don't!" Xinius shouted, hitting the creature again and again with the rapidly deteriorating remnants of the chair. "Those are my notes!" The golem pulled a wax tablet off a shelf and moved one finger heavily through the soft surface, obliterating any writing the tablet may have held. "That did it," Xinius growled. He took two steps back, dropped the chair and put his hands together. "I shall not spare the rod."

Everol felt his skin tingle as he watched his friend pull on the magical energies surrounding them. A ball of shimmering air coalesced in Xinius' hands. "Wait!"

It was too late. The ball of air hardened to stone and flew from Xinius' hands towards the creature's back. It struck the base of the neck and disappeared.

In an instant, the creature howled in pain and swung around, looking for the source of its antagonism. A feral snarl replaced the childlike glee on its face, and a ragged breathing pulsed from its chest as the eyes shifted from Xinius to Everol, and back to Xinius again.

"Oh, no..." Xinius muttered, stepping rapidly backwards, his sandals crunching on the broken glass. He came to a stop by Everol. "I forgot about that part."

They watched as the creature moved to cut off their only escape, standing in front of the stairway as it tried to decide which of them was responsible for the sorcerous attack.

"We're lucky," Everol whispered to his friend. "It's not sure which of us cast that last spell. You know, that may not have been the wisest course of action."

"You think?" Xinius had recovered his composure enough to vent his words with sarcasm.

"You said it was a child."

"Perhaps I should have said it is *like* a child," Everol amended. "There are some distinctions beyond the obvious physical form. Next time, spare the rod."

The ragged puffing of the golem's chest changed rhythm, and it pawed the ground with one foot, reminding Everol of an enraged bull about to charge. Looking left and right, the sorcerer understood its sudden loss of indecision.

Xinius appeared to reach the same conclusion at the same moment. "We might want to do something about our close proximity. I think I made it mad."

"That would be a fair assessment." Everol moved to the right, away from his friend. "We need to split up. If one of us can make it to the stairs..."

The golem charged across the room, arms swinging, fists clenched. The small bits of furniture and remaining pieces of glass that remained in its path were obliterated. Xinius dove away from the golem, rolling under a table. Everol forgot about his friend as he scampered in the opposite direction. His only hope now was to stay one step ahead of the creature. Hugging the outer wall of the room, he tried to make his way towards the stairs. He barely made it.

A ham-sized fist sailed past his head and connected with the brick and mortar, shifting a fine sheen of dust into his grey hair. The golem howled in pain and danced back into the center of the room, cradling its injured limb. Not one to pass on an opportunity, Everol skittered past it and made his way to the stairs, stopping on the first step as he looked back to see what the golem would do.

Shaking its injured fist and growling menacingly, the golem spun in a circle. It focused on Everol, and then turned to face Xinius as the sorcerer clambered to his feet, the table between him and the creature. Its indecision showed clearly on its face.

As the golem spun to face Everol again Xinius called out, "Maybe it will get dizzy." The sound of his voice made the golem swing its attention back to Xinius, and it grabbed a bench, hefting it like a club over its head. "Then again, maybe not. I could use a little help here."

Everol, understanding his friend's predicament, picked up the nearest object and hurled it at the giant's back. The partially broken vase shattered against the rippling muscles, but did not deter the golem as it advanced on the trapped sorcerer. Everol rarely used his powers as a weapon, but this time he did not hesitate. A small sphere of air condensed in his extended hand, then hurtled towards the golem. As soon as it touched the golem's skin it disappeared, the magical energies evaporating. But it was enough to get the creature's attention.

Roaring its displeasure, the golem took a half-hearted swing at Xinius, who ducked under the table again. The bench splintered as it rebounded off the stone wall where Xinius had been standing. Dismissing the cowering sorcerer, the giant creature tossed the broken wood aside and swung its full attention to Everol.

Everol formed another sphere in his hand. This one, similar to the sorcerer's light, should have blasted the man into a thousand pieces. Like the sphere of air, it too disappeared as soon as it touched the giant. Satisfied that he had the golem's undivided attention, Everol ran down the curving staircase, taking the steps two at a time. When he reached the bottom, he paused only long enough to insure that the golem was following him, leaving Xinius alone in the higher chamber.

Outside the tower, Everol drew ragged breaths as he cast around for something to use against the creature following him. The two slaves working the masters' herb garden looked up from their work, uncertain what his frenzied appearance meant for their chore. One of them opened his mouth to say something, but the grinding sound of the tower door's hinges being

ripped from the stone wall interrupted him. With a shriek, he dropped his rake and ran. His companion wasted little time in joining his flight.

Everol did not look over his shoulder. He could hear the golem, and he knew what little time he had was quickly running out. In the center of the courtyard he spied the university well. The rakes. The well. In an instant, he had a plan.

Racing to the well, Everol put the round stone wall between himself and the golem before he threw another sphere of air at the raging monstrosity. The effect was everything he could have hoped for. With a blood curdling roar, the golem charged at him, its head down, arms outstretched, and fingers extended.

Everol waited, watching the creature's approach, gauging the time he needed. Keeping his eyes on the golem, he reached out with his consciousness, caressing the magical energies, forming them into three coherent strands. One of the strands he used to form a simple sphere of light in his hand. He had one shot.

The golem reached the well, skidding to a stop against the waist-high wall. It rested its massive hands on the wall, and considered the sorcerer and the obstacle that separated them by a mere three strides. Growling at him, it bared its teeth and crouched, ready to spring.

Everol struck.

The ball of light, fed to bursting with explosive power, leapt from the sorcerer's fingers. It slammed into the base of the wall closest to the golem. Immediately the wall crumbled, and a good portion of the ground near it gave way, sliding into the well. The golem, its sneer melting into a look of fear, teetered. It struggled and swayed, its feet trying to find steady purchase on the crumbling ground. Just as it managed to find some semblance of balance, Everol released his holds on the final strands of magical energies he held.

The two rakes flew through the air towards the golem's back. They crossed the distance, racing faster and faster until the first hit the golem in the back of his knees. The second rake struck higher, between the creature's shoulder blades.

Off-balance once more, its knees buckling, the golem pitched forward through the opening in the well. Its hands scrabbled for a hold but found none. All the way down, it screamed its anger and hatred.

* * *

His knees still shaking from his encounter with the golem, Everol climbed the last stairs of the tower, entering the demolished laboratory. He took a moment at the top to rest his weary body against the frame of the chamber's door, his eyes scanning the interior for Xinius. His friend was kneeling amid the wreckage, head bowed over cupped hands.

Pushing away from the door frame, Everol shuffled across the room until he came to Xinius' kneeling form. With a few kicks of his sandaled feet, he cleared an area where he could lower his body. As he crossed his legs, Everol looked into his friend's cupped hands. The cristalleria. A glint of light caught on the broken glass figures, giving forth small prismatic rays.

"It's dead?" Xinius did not raise his head.

"I pushed it down the well. Two students guard the top to make sure it doesn't climb back out. It's just a matter of time before it drowns." Everol chuckled. "The university administrators are not happy about that. They're looking for someone to blame."

His friend nodded, shifted the contents in his hands, and raised two of the broken figures, the remnants of a man and a child. "All that's left of my family," Xinius said. He handed the

child, the body broken in two, to Everol. "There's no way I can fix them. But, at least…" He tapped his head, a smile lightening his serious face, "I have them up here." With a side-armed throw, Xinius sent the figure of the man careening into the far wall to shatter.

Everol gasped. "What are you doing?"

Xinius shrugged. "Finishing what I started, I guess." He gestured at the wall. "Feel free. In the end, it's only glass."

Shifting the two halves of the child figurine in his hand, Everol weighed Xinius' words. With a sigh, he threw the child against the wall.

Putting his hands on his knees, Xinius pushed himself upright. "Well, that's done." He offered Everol a hand up and then turned slowly, surveying the room. "What a mess."

"You never do anything halfway," Everol agreed.

There was a long silence.

"You knew it was a golem."

Feeling the accusation, Everol shifted through the rubble of Xinius' workshop until he found the remains of a stool and sat on it. He slumped his shoulders. "In my callous youth, I worked that spell once. It is something I will regret to my dying day, for it destroys the one thing that makes us who we are."

"The soul…" Xinius whispered.

Everol nodded. "I should have destroyed the tablet. But erasing knowledge is difficult for me, so I hid it instead." He saw the comprehension in the other man's eyes. "I see you found it."

Xinius sighed. "I wanted to end our silly games. I found the tablet and thought it would be the perfect way to prove, once and for all, I was the stronger sorcerer."

"What happened?"

"I had to change the spell." His friend paused. "I couldn't take the man's soul for the final ingredient. He was a criminal, a murderer, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't become like him. A menagerie was in the city, so I bought an ape from the southlands."

"You used a beast?" Everol could not keep the incredulousness from his voice. "But they have no soul. It should have been impossible."

Looking at the room to accentuate his words, Xinius said, "Well, I wouldn't say I succeeded."

"True," Everol agreed. "But still, you made it work." He began to chuckle, shaking his head in wonder. "And you wouldn't commit the ultimate atrocity to do it." Slapping his knee, Everol stood up. "You refused to rip a soul from a man—no matter what his crimes. I cannot say the same, so to me that makes you the stronger." He made his face become serious again. "If you tell anyone I said that, I'll kill you."

Xinius, his face beaming at the compliment, laughed. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Good. Now, shall we end our—as you say—silly games?" Everol asked.

Xinius nodded, extending his hand. "No more tricks."

"No more tricks." Everol grasped the hand with one of his own.

They shook.

Joining arms, they helped each other to the stairs. As they reached the first one, Xinius stopped and looked back at his laboratory.

"You don't suppose I could get your help tidying this place up?"

Everol shook his head. "You have to pay the consequences of your actions."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Xinius faced back down the stairs and took a gingerly first step. "You know, this is going to take some getting used to."

"Tell me about," Everol muttered, grinning at his friend. "What am I going to do with all the hamsters I bought?" He held up his hands to ward off the glare Xinius directed at him. "I'll donate them to science. I promise."

"You better."

"It won't be as much fun," Everol lamented.

"Neither is waking up to a bed full of red ants," his friend challenged.

"Good point."

With nothing left to say they left the tower laughing, happy to be alive—happy to be friends.

# The End

*Trey Nix lives and writes in Colorado. His current profession is Storage Administration, but he hopes to pursue a full-time writing career in the future. Until then, he uses his free time to write science fiction and fantasy stories and novels. "All Joking Aside" is his first published work.*

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continued from page 26

disagreed with him. “I’ll eat anyone who tries to ride me,” said his growl. When they did not back away again he realized that, although he understood human language, they were unable to interpret his. Distracted by the huge soup bone held out to him by Rij’s eldest daughter, Aminah, who was said to eat like a tiger, he went right up to her and took it from her plump hand.

“Aha! He likes me best!” exclaimed raven haired Aminah, hugging herself. “I’m going inside to put on my best white silk pantaloons and my rose-embroidered tunic to ride him. Then I will feed him dainties from my own gold plate.”

While Aminah went into the harem to bathe, change clothes, and perfume herself, Waugh, Lord of Tigers, devoured all that was set before him with gusto. He let everyone pet him, and even rub his belly, before leaping back over the palace wall to visit his privy. Since he’d eaten so greedily, he took quite awhile. Then, being meticulous about his grooming, he bathed in the river.

When Waugh returned to the palace in the moonlight, he found Aminah in tears, sitting alone by the lily pond. Beside her lay an empty gold plate; she had given up on him, and eaten all the dainty fare herself. “Waugh-waugh-ooh-waugh?” said he, laying his great tiger’s head in her soft lap. Pricking his ears toward her, he blinked his intelligent golden eyes in time with the cadence of her words.

“I thought you had left, never to return. Do you find me too thin to notice? Are my red pantaloons and black silk tunic ugly?” said the maiden, drying her tears and dancing before him gracefully. Unable to fit into her girlish clothes since her body had grown quite round, Aminah had borrowed her mother’s finery. “In all my life, I have never loved anyone or anything as I love you. There is nothing for it. That I may bear you children either I must become a tigress, or you must become my prince in the world of men. My dowry is worth a king’s ransom, and I will make you a good wife if we are both human. Take me away from here to where I may seek a sorcerer to aid us. Besides, if you do not, my mother, who is chief wife, will beat me for taking her clothes.”

“Ooh-waugh!” said the noble tiger, hoping Aminah understood that, when he licked her hand, he was agreeing and not going to eat her. Still full from his earlier feast, he was in love, too. His tiger’s heart felt as though it would burst trying to hold the love in.

Then, trusting him with her life, Aminah kissed the tip of Waugh’s nose and climbed upon his back. Her mother came forth from the harem just in time to see the tiger spring lightly over the wall with the girl riding him as if she weighed no more than a feather. Her hair flew out behind her like a dark cloud. Tasting freedom, she laughed in delight.

“Come back, Aminah! I promise I won’t beat you on account of the clothes,” cried the mother. Then she sent a runner with a letter to find Rij. In the letter, the wife begged her husband to slay the tiger and thus free their daughter from her unwholesome infatuation.

* * *

Waugh carried Aminah high into the northern mountains to a reclusive sorcerer who had raised him from a cub and taught him wisdom.

“Welcome, my children,” said Silver Beard the sorcerer who, having no family of his own, loved all creatures. “Please come in. I see you are both shivering and could use some tea and soup. I’ve just taken the bread from the oven. Help yourselves.”

Aminah, grown so thin on the journey that her mother’s clothes hung from her, refused food until she could kneel before the tiger and watch him lap up the tub of goat milk Silver Beard provided. After she ate and drank she said, “We have come a long way to find a solution to a difficult problem…”

"Wau-oogh!" interrupted Waugh, agreeing vehemently in his language, which the sorcerer, unlike other men, could understand.

"You need say no more. The way you care for each other tells me all I need to know." Silver Beard threw his cape over them, and they both fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.

In her dreams, Aminah lived the life of a tigress. According to the nature of tigers she spent very little time with Waugh, and much time raising cubs. When she awoke she said to the sorcerer, "I feel I've lived an entire lifetime as a tigress. Now I know what that kind of life means, sometimes lonely and cruel, sometimes beautiful and simple. But it would be unfair of me to force a change upon Waugh. I will await his decision."

Meanwhile, Waugh slept and dreamed he was a human prince, wed to Aminah. He was very busy with his family and, being a ruler, was forced to take many wives to keep peace with his neighbors. As a tiger, he had merely to win fights with other tigers, and then wait for them to leave or die. It was not so with men. He knew he would have to sacrifice his independence and his tiger's strength should he become human. His true love would have to share him with other wives, their children, and affairs of state and governance. It was a hard choice. But he was in love…

The sorcerer, for his part, had watched their dreams by magical means. He realized there was only one solution, but they would have to choose it.

"Ooh-waugh-ooh!" said the Tiger Lord on waking.

"What is his decision, Silver Beard?" asked Aminah.

"He says that, for your sake, he will become human, but for his sake, he must not be a prince among men."

"Then we must bear the nobility of tigers within us, while outwardly we remain poor," said Aminah, adding, "Once wed, we must go where my father, Rij, will never find us."

"There is a hut halfway down my mountain that you may use, Aminah. Tend my goats and grow a little garden. Now turn around. Your groom is waiting to guide you there." Silver Beard put Aminah's hand into that of the tall, bearded stranger with intelligent golden eyes who stood beside her, dressed in tiger-striped pants, tunic, and turban. They kissed, exchanging rings made of sorcerer's gold, their only riches besides their love…

Waugh was away looking for a lost goat kid when Aminah's father found her. Despite the fact that she was close to delivering her first child, Rij bore his daughter away to the palace. Though relieved to find her, he was furious at her for marrying a commoner. He did not realize that her man was the former Tiger Lord who had devoured Rij's eunuchs.

"I am taking that ugly ring from you, daughter," said Rij. "Once I do, you will be free to wed the man I choose for you. The commoner's child will be put out for tigers to eat."

"If you value your life, do not remove my ring, Father," said Aminah, who was already in labor with her firstborn. "You will also learn I do not worry about tigers."

Late that night, the women came running to let Rij know that Aminah's baby had been delivered. Far away on the mountain, Silver Beard had heard the news from Waugh, who told him, "My heart felt Aminah's call when her father took her ring. It felt our son's birth. More than sorcerer's gold unites us. Let me go to her quickly by magic!"

As Rij entered his daughter's isolated chamber to take away her child, the moonlight fell upon the infant's face. He watched the face change into that of a tiger cub. Aminah leapt from the bed, a hungry tigress.

"Stop, Aminah! Have mercy. I'm your father. Here, take back your ring."

She paused, but from the darkness came a low growl, and then a triumphant "Ooh-

waugh!" The mated tigers pounced upon Rij, devouring his heart before his very eyes. Then, with the mother bearing her cub in her teeth, they returned to the protection of Silver Beard's mountain. They lived undisturbed lives as human herders, whose descendants are renowned for their bravery and love of freedom to this day.

# The End

Critter *A.M. Stickel, a survivor of "Arob Arot," lives in "Flower Land" equidistant from the Runsok River and Deep End. She has contributed to* Deep Magic*,* Darwin's Bulldog*,* NFG*,* The Pedastal *(art), and Colin Harvey's* Showcase *(also reached via* The Night Land*). "Tiger Hearts" was inspired by the love of all free wild creatures.*

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continued from 33

kind of stranger though.

Jod watched the man collapse on the road.

* * *

"Who is it?" Aunt Roe said, scrubbing her doughy hands clean on a towel. Her forehead wrinkled as she held the door open with her foot. Jod and Uncle Reath muscled the stranger in the front door and onto the common-room floor. It hadn't rained in days, but he was soaked through. When Jod set him down and looked at his own hands they were glistening and red.

"Blood," he said, showing his aunt.

Aunt Roe tossed him the towel and knelt on the floor. She tugged open the cloak collar. He was paler than milk. She lowered her ear to the man's lips.

"He's breathing. Look at all the blood! I think the rebels got him."

"Still has his sword through," Uncle Reath said, untying the belt and handing the weapon to Jod. It was a tapered long sword, with a design on the hilt. A fancy shape with a cross-mark in it.

"What happened, Reath? Do you know him?"

"No. This tunic style looks different - a Shae garment, I think." He rummaged through his knapsack and found some food, some small books, a gem pouch, a key, and several candles. "I had a feeling there was trouble coming. Nobs didn't howl a bit either, worthless thing. Just… scared of a sudden. It went right through me, like a winter wind. Told Jod to fetch my weapon and there he was, coming up the road. Shuffling a lot too. Hate! Look at his arms. That's a sword wound. And another."

Aunt Roe had managed to get much of his shirt off. "They got him good all right. It'll take a month to scrub this floor clean." She swiped some hair around her ear and looked over her shoulder at Jod. "Does he have blood on his blade?"

Jod grabbed the pommel and loosened it from the scabbard. It was a gorgeous weapon, felt like a feather in his hand.

"No, ma'am."

"That blade's worth five hundred crowns, or I'm the Emperor's nephew," Reath said, whistling. He looked inside the gem pouch. "Five stones. Little markings on them."

The stranger's eyes flared open, the pupils dancing.

Uncle Reath gripped his arm. "Easy, friend. You're bleeding still. Let us try and staunch it. Don't fret, we'll tend you."

The stranger's eyes glazed over. He clutched a medallion, his lips pulling back in a snarl of pain. He jerked once and the chain snapped. The effort must have drained him, for his head lolled and his eyes shut.

"He's dead," Aunt Roe said, dropping her hands into her lap.

* * *

She was wrong.

The stranger's breathing was as shallow as a mouse's whisper, but his chest continued to rise and fall. The evening fire had burned down to glowing coals and it was Jod's turn to sit and watch the stranger while his uncle and aunt slept. They'd brought in some green redwood boughs for his bed, covered the branches with a blanket and shoved it near the fire to warm him.

The face was still pale, but the dimming coals showed some color flushed his cheeks. Jod kept the long sword across his lap and fingered the medallion the stranger had tugged off his neck. It was smeared in blood, but the symbol matched the one on the hilt. The light glimmered off the grooves as he turned and studied it.

"What's your name, boy?"

Jod nearly jumped. The stranger had bluish-gray eyes. Scars crisscrossed his cheeks and hands. He looked a little older than Uncle Reath, except his eyes.

"Jod, sir."

The stranger closed his eyes, grimacing, and then sat up.

"Sir, you shouldn't move. The stitches will tear back open. You need to…"

"I know what I need!" The stranger winced and took a deep breath, his hand clutching his bare chest. His muscles quivered as he sat forward. His eyes narrowed on the strange medallion in Jod's hand. Foolishly, Jod offered it back.

"No. I don't want it. It's too…heavy."

Jod stared at him. "Is it gold?"

"It's made of heavier stuff than gold. Put it away. I don't want to see it. I can't bear to look at it."

"I…I can have it?" It was probably worth ten crowns in weight alone.

"Put it away!"

Stuffing it in his pocket, he stared at the stranger. "What's…what's your name, sir?"

He chuckled and winced again. "My name? Which one? There are so many names. So many things we call ourselves. What others call us." There was bitterness in his voice. A bitterness deeper than the lake outside.

The bedposts creaked and Uncle Reath padded over, his hair disheveled, his whiskers wild. "Put a log in the fire, Jod."

The stranger shook his head. "Don't bother, Reath. It'll be dawn soon. And then I must go."

"Go? I don't think you're fit to walk further than the stoop, friend." Jod glimpsed Aunt Roe brushing out her hair.

"I'm fit enough. I still have a walk ahead of me. A long walk."

Uncle Reath folded his arms across his chest. "Who are you?"

A wince was followed by a despairing smile. "You don't recognize me, Reath? You wound me, son. You wound me to the quick."

Silence.

Jod stared at the stranger, who was barely older than his uncle in years.

Uncle Reath cocked his head, his eyes boring into the stranger's. "Should I know you?"

"How long has it been for you? How long ago did I leave? Hello, Clitheroe."

Aunt Roe clutched a shawl and approached, her eyes blazing. "How do you know my name? I've never met you."

"No, you're right. We've never met. But I saw the day you were married. You had a garland of lavender. I was there in my own way."

Reath's jaw clenched. "It can't be…"

"Aye, Reath. I gave you your banned name. I named your brother as well. Don't you see your own blood and know it? How long have I been gone?"

"You can't be more than five and forty! My father would be white-haired, sick…"

"White-haired? Sick? You believe what you want to believe. But I know who I am. Just as well as I know who you are. And the boy. I left the Westfall because I had to. Because of my

oaths. I've come back to give you a warning. And I've come to kill the Emperor."

Jod's stomach clenched with dread. "You're a Sleepwalker."

"Names, lad. I have so many names. That is only one of them."

"Get out of my home," Reath said, his voice choking with emotion. "You're not my father. I don't know what daft you take me for, but we are loyal to the Emperor in this house. We…"

"If five and twenty soldiers of his *most holy* Emperor's army couldn't compel me, you think you can? Must I prove it to you then?"

"You're wounded, I…"

"Don't begrudge me my wounds, son. You raise a blade or a fist at me, and you'll bruise for your pains. I promise you. There is not enough time to squander making you believe who I am. Ask me a question that only your father would know."

"Trickery," Aunt Roe said. "We won't compel you to leave, sir. I wouldn't give up hospitality like that, despite my husband's anger. But I don't believe you. This is trickery."

"No, it's truth. I am who I said I was. I am your father, Reath. And your grandfather, Jod. I am ninety years old, but am no older than I was when I first entered the city of Safehome. You have both aged and grown older." He glanced at Jod. "You were *born*, young man, whilst I've been walking the crossroads. I am who I said I was." His gaze went back to Uncle Reath.

"Your mother's name was Bianya. How I miss her. How I miss our companionship. Your brother was Ilroman. You called him Roman." He buried his face in his hands. "And he is…and he is dead. We were not killed in the woods by some beast as you've supposed. Your brother and I. We are Sleepwalkers. We cannot be killed by normal men. But Roman." His face twisted with pain. "Killed by a Sorian in Galamine. It's a price too heavy to bear. No man should wear the amulet this long. It has been a torment for me to see you, and not be seen. To see Roman's face bloom on yours, Jod." His eyes filled with tears.

Uncle Reath's face contorted with emotions. Then Jod watched the two men embrace and weep. He bit his lip, struggling against his own feelings. Aunt Roe stared at them both, her eyes narrowed and distrustful. She glanced at Jod and motioned him closer, clutching his shoulders and burying a kiss in his hair.

* * *

Jod swooped the axe down, splitting the log cleanly. Nobs yawned and wet his jowls with a huge pink tongue. Reaching down, Jod grabbed a broken cusp of wood and set it down on the block. Hefting the axe, he swung it up and over again and struck the piece in two, the halves spinning.

Another shiver went down his back. Looking up, he saw the Sleepwalker - his grandfather - sitting in the rocking chair on the porch, watching him. No words passed between them, but the Sleepwalker rose, wincing, and stepped off the porch onto the dirt and sedge grass between the front door and the lake.

Jod set the axe down, curious.

The Sleepwalker stood still, his head slightly bowed, and then brought his arms up, hands clenched into fists, as if he were lifting two buckets full of water. A chevron of ducks winged across the lake as the Sleepwalker started. He moved like a dance, his arms and legs creating a rhythm of motion. His hands flung up, hooked down, then shoved outward, then repeated thrice before he twisted around, his legs bent, one foot further back from the other. Jod was mesmerized by it. It was a complicated series of steps, each one taking him in a different

direction but never far from the spot where he started.

After a long while it was finished, and the Sleepwalker raised his hands and seemed to be pressing some unseen weight into the earth. His shoulders sagged.

"What…what was that?" Jod asked, nudging the axe against the stump.

"A way of fighting, lad. A way that has been handed down since the Shae first came to this world. Have you seen a Shae, Jod?"

He shook his head. "Uncle Reath has - in the Great City. They send barters to trade with us."

The Sleepwalker nodded. "The Shae are like you and I, only more fair-skinned. But they are different than us in many ways, Jod."

"Different? How?"

"Have you ever seen a man who's eyes glow in the dark? Like a mountain lion? Or a coon?"

"No, sir."

"The Shaes' do. And they can smell magic. Earth magic or Forbidden magic. They smell it. Like fruit or dung, they say. They can sense it being used, for they smell it for what it really is. They smell its purity or its taint. I wish we were as lucky."

"Uncle said your clothes were Shae-make. Did you buy them from a barter? Is your sword theirs as well?"

The Sleepwalker smiled. "Aye. And the medallion."

"Why do you swing your arms like you did?" Jod tried to mimic him, but felt a blush burn in his cheeks. "What is that?"

"It's as I told you. It's the way the Sleepwalkers learn to fight. See this? I twist my hand and pull back and bring my arm around. It looks silly to you. But it'll break a man's arm."

"How?"

"Give me your arm."

"No!"

"I won't hurt you, Jod. I'd never hurt you." His eyes blazed.

Jod bit his lip and held out his arm.

"I grab your wrist, see? Twist my hand and pull back." Jod's arm was extended now, and he felt a little prick of pain in his shoulder. "And bring my arm around." The Sleepwalker's forearm came softly, tapping Jod's arm right above the elbow. "If I did it quickly, and you were holding a weapon, it would break your arm. Then how would you fight me?"

The front door opened, and Aunt Roe came out to the porch. "Breakfast, Jod. Have you finished splitting the wood?"

"Almost. I'm sorry." There was a look in her eye. He wasn't sure if she was angry or just disappointed. Or worried.

"You eat your food, Jod," the Sleepwalker said. "I'll split the wood."

* * *

Jod picked the crust from the loaf and chewed it, listening as another story unfolded. For two days the Sleepwalker had rested, telling them about his travels across the lands beyond the Empire. The deep lands in the north. Out the window, the sun had not cleared the towering redwoods that hunkered on the mountain shoulders where they lived, high in the Westfall.

Uncle Reath's plate lay untouched, his elbows planted firmly on the table as he leaned forward, his eyes soaking in the scarred face of the man who claimed to be his father, yet looked

young enough to be a brother. Aunt Roe sliced pears and dropped them into a dish of honey, but she watched them both, her eyes wary.

"And where is this city of Safehome?" Uncle Reath asked, twisting strands of his whiskers. "To the north? To the east?"

"No! It is a city amidst the clouds. It does not dwell in any land."

"The Emperor has flying cities," Jod said. "I've seen one. When we were visiting Pythian a few years ago. It passed over us."

Aunt Roe shot him an angry look and he nibbled on the bread, cheeks burning.

"Aye, Jod. He does. And they were fashioned after Safehome's likeness. Yes. That is where I have studied my arts. That is where I swore the oaths. The oaths that weigh like anchors within me. But I cannot abide them any longer. Not knowing what will happen here to this fair land."

"What do you mean?" Aunt Roe asked, setting down the knife.

"I came here to kill the Emperor. If ever a man deserves death, it is he. But I came to the Westfall first to warn you. You must flee northward. Before the winter snows. If you wait until after winter, it will be too late. You will die. All of you."

"How? From what?" Uncle said.

"A great plague. The Emperor is causing it, though he does not know it. In ignorance, he abuses magic that he does not comprehend. Forbidden magic. There are consequences coming, Reath. Horrible consequences. The wars he is fighting…the people that have died and are dying…"

"The wars have only grazed us so far," Reath said, shaking his head. "They fight in the valley, not here in the highlands. They fight over farm fields and cities, not rock and scrub. If soldiers come, we will take the boat and cross the lake. We've already planned it, have foodstuffs stored on the other shore."

The Sleepwalker's face kindled with fury. "No! You must leave the Westfall. If you do not cross the mountains before the snows, you will not make it out in time. The lake cannot protect you from the consequences of the magic. It'll poison the waters, kill the fish. Poison you! Did you not hear me, Reath? I came here to warn this family! Leave the mountains before it is too late."

"But what you say makes no sense!" Aunt Roe said. "What magic is there that has such a far reach? The Emperor's city is leagues away - it takes a month to go there by wagon. What game you are playing with us? We are safe in the mountains."

"Safe? Here? Of course you don't understand! How can I expect you to when you are as blind as pups sucking the paps? Yet believe me. You *must* leave before the winter snows." He stood abruptly, wincing with pain and doubling over.

Uncle Reath scowled. "If you *don't* let the wounds heal, you…"

"You know nothing of my injuries! I will be well enough tomorrow." He turned and let out a hiss and curse. "There is so little time!" He whirled and faced them. "I have seen the future of this Empire. In Safehome, one can earn a glimpse into the future. I have watched this Empire's death. I have watched its underpinnings crumble. She is failing. Can you not see that? And when it happens, the plume of dust that will rise from her disgrace will consume everything. Dust! A deadly, choking plague of dust! You see that mountain from your window view?" He pointed out the window at the majestic Obermon mountain, white-capped even during the summer. "She quenches your thirst with her melt. She makes this lake you shelter by. But the day will come, and very soon, when the soldiers will come seeking that water. Men will draw their swords and kill each other for a drink of untainted water. Forget troves of golden crowns! Forget tiaras and

diadems! They will kill you for your water because there will be no water left in the valley. The salty brine of the sea will not quench them. Only that will. And it will still not be enough for they will fight over it as they have fought over everything else. To control what was never meant to be controlled!"

Jod stared at him, his throat too dry to speak. The tips of his ears burned.

The Sleepwalker clenched his fists. "You are all so blind! So comfortable and easy during these years of plentitude. Do you know why they call us Sleepwalkers? Because it is as if we walk the land amidst a world that has fallen asleep. You slumber when you should be watchful. You hunt stags and fish trout and gather thimbleberries. It means nothing! The world is ablaze around you. Puppetmasters tug the strings and emperors and kings dance, and yet you sleep while the smoke chokes you. I have seen it. I have seen too much."

Aunt Roe's hand clutched Uncle Reath's. "I think you should leave, Sleepwalker. You've said enough."

"No army can move that quickly," Uncle Reath whispered. "If the Emperor's city falls, there will be time to leave. If soldiers come up the Pythian Road, we can reach the boat before they reach us. I thank you for your warning, but you are asking us to leave our home. Where would we go? What other place is there for us?"

"Seek refuge from the Shae king of Avisahn." He leaned forward on the table, his eyes blazing with contempt. "With as many as will follow you to their safety." He looked Uncle Reath in the eye, his face a mask of pain. "You must do this. I cannot save you a second time."

Aunt Roe frowned. "How do you mean a…?"

"How did I come by these wounds, Roe? There were soldiers already upon you. You would all have been dead the other morn if I had not forsaken Safehome and journeyed here." His eyes closed and his face contorted. His voice was a whisper. "They have the power to stop the devastation. Yet they will not."

"You speak in riddles!" Aunt Roe said, her face twisting with confusion.

The Sleepwalker kneaded his eyes. "Those in the city of Safehome. It is hidden in the clouds overlooking the Empire, waiting for the consequences of the magic to prevail. They have the power, yet they do nothing. Nothing! They will let millions die. Do you even understand how vast your Empire is? All will be killed. All of them save those who flee now. How I argued. How I wrestled. I pleaded! A warning we must give to you. But nothing I could say would move them with compassion. The consequences will happen, just as they have foretold. I cannot understand it. I cannot agree with it any longer."

Nobs growled and lifted his head.

They went to the front door and stepped out into the morning air. Plumes of dust stained the sky. The sound of marching, of horse and harness and spurs, filled the air.

Grandfather bowed his head. "Am I too late?" he whispered to no one. His head snapped up. "The Sorian moves quickly against me. How quick and how clever! You must leave, Reath. Take the boy and your wife and go. Flee to the Shae in Avisahn. Seek refuge to the north. Go!"

Uncle Reath's eyes were set. "Jod, take your aunt to the boat and get it ready. Take Nobs too."

"Reath?"

"Heed me, Roe. Go with Jod. Now."

Jod bit his lip, wanting to defy his uncle. But he had never done that in his life. Aunt Roe grabbed the loaf of bread and wrapped it up in her apron. Tears danced on her lashes as she abandoned her kitchen. She looked back longingly at the hanging pots, the wood-handled

skewers, the ladles and spoons on the pegs. Jod swallowed, feeling his heart break. Every memory of his whole life had taken place in the stone and wood cabin. Just looking at the ladder leading up to the loft made his eyes burn.

Uncle Reath swung his arm through the scabbard strap and seized his longbow and leather quiver.

"No, Reath. Go with them." The Sleepwalker's voice was full of ice.

"Come, Jod." Aunt Roe tugged him after her, holding the bundle of bread against her stomach. He hesitated. "Jod!"

Biting his lip, he followed her out to the small dock, pausing to fetch his axe and grab Nobs by the collar. The hound barked and jumped, straining against him, snarling at the sounds approaching from the Pythian Road.

"Jod, hurry!"

Uncle Reath and the Sleepwalker argued, but the roar of blood in Jod's ears smothered the words. Aunt Roe waved him to join her in the boat. Her eyes never left his face, her expression pinched and worried. He hesitated at the first plank on the docks and turned to look back.

Outriders wearing the colors of the Emperor thundered up the road. There were fifty soldiers with even more behind. Hard ones too, those outriders, Jod thought. Two against fifty?

"Jod!"

Then Uncle Reath was running towards him, his face pale, his eyes frantic. "Into the boat, Jod! Into the boat!"

"What about Grandfather?"

The first of the outriders closed the gap to a hundred paces from the stone cabin. The Sleepwalker stepped away from the porch, unsheathing his blade in a fluid motion. He walked away from the cottage, Jod's home, and started down the road.

The medallion!

Jod fished in his pocket and pulled out the burnished token with its broken chain. "Uncle! It's his!" He started to chase after his grandfather, but Uncle Reath clamped his body with a grip that would leave bruises. "There's no time, Jod." He struggled against his uncle, but was yanked away and dragged down the dock. Uncle shoved him into the boat and Aunt Roe caught him, hugging him fiercely, squeezing him, kissing him.

Jod wrenched around and the boat lurched as Uncle Reath stepped in and shoved off from the dockpost. Nobs barked from the dock, but a piercing whistle from Uncle made the dog jump into the boat with them.

"Grab the other oar, Jod. Hurry, lad! Row!"

Jod snatched the oar, his eyes burning, and fit it into the oarlock. Together, they rowed away from the dock, gliding faster and faster into the smooth waters. Sharp voices challenged the Sleepwalker. The outriders all had bows and even from the distance, Jod could see he arrows pointed at his grandfather.

"Pull, lad! Pull!"

Jod pulled, gritting his teeth, feeling like a coward. He heard the bowstrings twang and watched for his grandfather to crumple.

The arrows missed him. All of them.

Jod stopped rowing. Uncle Reath stopped rowing, the oar blades slicing through the still waters. They stared as Grandfather's sword came up and the killing began.

* * *

Rain slapped against the sodden tent wall, but it didn't matter. The floor was a river of filth and mud. Jod felt he would never be dry or warm again. Aunt Roe, her face bright with fever, pressed a kiss against his cheek. "I'll be fine, Jod."

Jod opened the flap of the tent, staring at the hundreds of tents pitched against the gritty shores. Where was Uncle? The Sleepwalker medallion felt cool against his chest. It did have a certain heaviness that seemed odd. He feared they might have to barter it for passage aboard one of the ships in the Shae fleet.

As he watched the sheets of rain, the memories swarmed again. Before the mist of the lake had swallowed their boat, he had watched the Sleepwalker kill. Had watched his *Grandfather* kill. It had been like trying to keep a hummingbird in sight as it darted here and there, up and down. And what a deadly hummingbird it was. So much blood. Though the fog hid the scene from their eyes, the screams and groans were enough to haunt him still.

Uncle Reath approached, his face mud-spattered as he crossed the maze of tents. He approached their hovel with a frown, his whiskers trembling with rage, his face dripping. Aunt Roe lifted up weakly, her lips pale. "Reath? Did we have enough?"

He hung his head and then nodded. "Barely. The banned Shae barter took everything. Everything! We'll be on board the next ship, loading tomorrow, and will sail for a township…no, the Shae call them *watchposts* - a place named Sol. They have a healer on the ship, Roe. I told them you were sick."

"I'll be fine, Reath. They took…they took it all?"

He nodded. "But that's not what grieves me. There was news."

Jod's stomach dropped.

"The barters were discussing it." Rainwater dripped down his face. "An assassin tried to kill the Emperor before the winter snows. Would have killed the Emperor too, but the Emperor's advisor destroyed him with some arcane magic. They say…they said the assassin was a Sleepwalker."

A sharp spike of pain went through Jod's heart. He clutched his grandfather's medallion and wept.

# The End

*A writer since high school, Jeff Wheeler published a fantasy children's story, The Wishing Lantern, in 1999. He was born in New Jersey but grew up in Silicon Valley in California. He attended San Jose State University and graduated with a bachelor's and master's degree in medieval History. He continued his education and completed an MBA in 2001. He and his wife Gina currently reside in Rocklin, CA. They have a daughter and a son. Visit his website at www.jeff-wheeler.com.*

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